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# Tales of the Unexpected?

# A Poststructural Exploration of Journeys from 'the Worst School in Britain' to University and Beyond

**by**

**Denise A Rogers**

**A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Social Sciences**

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# Abstract

My project focuses on the surprising educational trajectories of 5 people. I am one of them. Our stories, though quite different in some respects, have several features in common. We all grew up on social housing estates in low-income households, none of our parents had academic or professional qualifications, and we all attended the same school, Blakelaw Comprehensive, once described in a Channel Four documentary as 'the worst school in Britain'. The 'widening participation' evidence-base indicates that 'people like us' are statistically unlikely to go to university. And yet, against the odds, we all did. Why us?

In an attempt to grapple with this question, I've worked with memories, archived records, images, artefacts, writing practices and a 'thinking with theory' methodology to explore the 'conditions of possibility' under which going to university became thinkable and doable for us. My study is poststructurally positioned. I've used Bourdieu's theoretical triad of habitus, field and capital, Barad's concept of intra-action and Foucault's ideas about the subject to consider the constellations of events, timing, place, bodies, practices and ideas that might have come to matter.

None of our stories fit the heroic narrative in which an exceptional person, one of the 'brightest and best', overcomes the circumstances of their impoverished childhood and makes it to university through a combination of intelligence, determination and hard work. In contrast, our partial, fragmented, and sometimes contradictory accounts include tales of truancy, academic failure, undiagnosed dyslexia, coincidence, violence, pre-menstrual tension, humour, supportive and indifferent teachers, fear, football tops and hair-styles. When viewed through a range of theoretical lenses our stories serve to undermine the over-simplistic categories of 'failing school', 'disadvantage', and 'bright pupil'. They also suggest that deviation from an educational path predicted by the circumstances of upbringing is both extremely difficult and entirely possible.

# Dedication

In memory of David Draper, Syd Tippins and Eddie Rogers

This wouldn't exist without them

# Acknowledgements

Thank you

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To my generous, funny, interesting, remarkable contributors Sara, Rob, Alan, David, Gloria, Renee, Tim and Jack.

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To Marega Palser for the rich walking, talking and writing companionship. And the art.

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To David Byrne and Talking Heads - also for the sanity.

And to Kate - for the love, laughter and support and for explaining the difference between a metaphor and an analogy to me.

# Author’s Declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's *Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes* and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

SIGNED: ..... DATE:.....

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# PART ONE

# Chapter 1

# Welcome and Joining Instructions

*We're largely unconscious. You know, we operate half awake or on autopilot and end up, whatever, with a house and family and job and everything else, and we haven't really stopped to ask ourselves, 'How did I get here?'*

David Byrne, interview with Karr, 2000

## 1.1 What's it all about?

Welcome to my thesis, Reader. This is the textual manifestation of a project I've been working on for the past four years. Or my whole life depending on how you look at it. My project focuses on the surprising educational trajectories of 5 people who went on to university 'against the odds'. I am one of them. Our stories, though quite different in some respects, have several features in common. We all grew up on social housing estates in low-income households, none of our parents had academic or professional qualifications, and we all attended the same school, Blakelaw Comprehensive, which was situated in one of the UK's most deprived neighbourhoods in the West End of Newcastle upon Tyne. The academic evidence-base indicates that 'people like us' are statistically unlikely to do well in school and go on to higher education. And yet: Sara went on to the London School of Economics (LSE) and gained a first class degree with the highest marks in her year; Alan earned a PhD in his 20s; Rob, a frequent truant who could barely read when he left school, went on to gain an undergraduate degree and a postgraduate certificate relating to his role as a clinical auditor; David, who left with only one GCSE above a grade D, did a degree and retrained as a primary school teacher in his 40s; and I went on to Oxford University, have 2 MScs and will hopefully earn a PhD from Bristol University sometime soon. If you'd seen us as kids, knew the housing estates we'd grown up on, witnessed some of the antics that went on in our classrooms, I think you'd agree that our educational trajectories are surprising. Why us?

I've work with memories, archived records, images, artefacts, writing practice and theory in an attempt to grapple with this question. I haven't identified any isolatable, causal factors. That wasn't my intention. I have explored the 'conditions of possibility' – the constellations of events, timing, place, bodies, practices and ideas – under which going to university became thinkable and doable for us. None of our stories fit the smooth, heroic narrative template in which an exceptional person, one of the 'brightest and

best', overcomes the circumstances of their impoverished childhood and makes it to university through a combination of keen intelligence, gritty determination and an admirable work ethic. In contrast, our partial, fragmented, and sometimes contradictory accounts include tales of truancy, academic failure, undiagnosed dyslexia, coincidence, violence, pre-menstrual tension, humour, supportive and indifferent teachers, fear, football shirts, hair-styles and grandmothers. When viewed through a range of theoretical lenses our stories serve to undermine the over-simplistic categories of 'failing school', 'disadvantage', and 'bright pupil'. They also suggest that deviation from an educational path predicted by the circumstances of upbringing is both extremely difficult and entirely possible.

## 1.2 A few words on my poststructural positioning

My project is positioned within a broadly poststructural theoretical framework and therefore underpinned by the following assumptions about the world and what we can know of it: language produces rather than reflects the world; all claims of truth and knowledge mask and serve particular interests; power is dynamic, relational and contextual; matter matters; the tensions and contradictions in our work should be embraced rather than resolved or hidden; context, intersections and configurations are analytically more revealing than binary oppositions, categories and hierarchies. I explain why I have used the term 'poststructural' as an umbrella term for a variety of 'post' approaches and talk about some key aspects of poststructural thinking and their implications for the social researcher in chapter 4.

I love poststructural thinking. I suspect its sceptical, anti-authoritarian, contrary, hopefulness attracts people like me – hybrids, margin-surfers, in-between dwellers. My poststructural positioning has influenced every aspect of my project, not least the structure, content and style of this thesis. It doesn't inform my methodology: it is my methodology. My relationship to poststructural thinking is important, not only because it has determined the kind of questions I've asked and the ways I've attempt to answer them, but

also because it offers some potential insights into the conditions of possibility in which my own surprising educational trajectory has taken form. This is something I explore in chapters 3 and 5. If you've already looked at the contents page you might be wondering where the literature review is. There isn't one. I explain why in chapter 7, which also identifies some of the texts that I consider my thesis to be 'in conversation with'.

My methodology is 'thinking with theory', an approach I took from the poststructurally inclined writer-researchers Alicia Jackson and Lisa Mazzei (2012) and adapted. Thinking with theory involves the reading of data through a variety of theoretical lenses. The purpose is not to pin down what 'really happened' or what it 'really meant', but to produce interpretations that open up thinking about an aspect of social life that enable us to think about ourselves, the world and the future in new ways. I present my methodology in chapter 6. I have used three theories, or clusters of theory, to think with: Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical triad, habitus, field and capital; Karen Barad's concept of intra-action; and Michel Foucault's notion of the subject. If you are familiar with social theorists and movements of the past 50 years, you might well be wondering why I've selected the sociologist Bourdieu as a thinking companion. I explain my decision to do so in chapter 7. In chapter 8 I set out some key features of Bourdieu's thinking which I 'put to work' in chapter 9. I do the same with Barad in 10 and 11 and Foucault in chapters 12 and 13. In chapter 14 I reflect on this PhD journey, examining the place I ended up in which, for better or worse, is certainly not the place I intended to get to when I set out. I reflect on some of the productive and constraining features of my approach and consider the difference this project might have made. I draw the thesis to a close in chapter 15 which gives an account of a 'data collection exercise' that became an opportunity to change the past.

### 1.3 My project ambitions

Broadly speaking, I have 4 ambitions for this project. I've already indicated the first: to explore the conditions of possibility in which the surprising

educational trajectories of my contributors and I played out. This is something I begin to work on in relation to my own story in chapter 2. I continue this work in relation to my contributor's journeys in addition to my own in chapters 8 to 13.

My second ambition is to respond honestly to the implications of poststructural thinking. A poststructural take on concepts like the subject, voice, data, knowledge and memory poses significant challenges for those of us who wish to undertake empirical, or 'data driven' social research. I discuss this in chapter 4.

You are at the heart of my third ambition, Reader. I want to produce a thesis that engages people who are interested in its social subject matter regardless of their familiarity with poststructural thinking. To this end I've attempted to write in an interesting and intelligible way. This is no mean feat given my theoretical positioning. Poststructural writing style is characterised by long and complex sentences, new or repurposed words and paradoxical statements. Here is an example of some horrible poststructural writing:

> "Sense is both the expressible or the expressed of the proposition, and the attribute of the state of affairs. It turns one side toward things and the other side toward propositions. But it does not merge with the proposition which expresses it any more than with the state of affairs or the quality which the proposition denotes". (Deleuze, quoted in St. Pierre 2017, p.1084)

Impenetrable, isn't it? Absolute nonsense. Unless you're familiar with the work of the Gilles Deleuze, in which case you might find it thought provoking, persuasive, exhilarating. I have developed a degree of fluency in poststructuralist thinking, enough to get by and have some interesting conversations. I appreciate, Reader, that this might not be the case for you. Or on the other hand, you might be so fluent in poststructural thinking that you struggle to remember how the world looked before you ever encountered it. This is the challenge for me: to write in a way that will make

you want to engage with the ideas I present whatever your previous experience of poststructural thinking. Wish me luck.

My fourth ambition is that this project will facilitate the functioning of my most powerful drives producing a thesis with the capacity to do something interesting in the process. I'll explain what I mean by that in section 5.5.

## 1.4 How to read this thesis

My thesis has a three part structure which appears to follow a traditional progression: part one provides background information on the genesis and focus of the project, my aims, theoretical framework and methodology; part two puts my 'thinking with theory' methodology to work on the data; and part three reflects on the research process, the knowledge acquired and things I might have done differently. This structure is deceptive. In fact, the entire thesis, including the words you are now reading, is an enactment of my thinking with theory methodology.

My thesis takes the form of a layered text. Each chapter starts with a quote that has shed light on an issue pertinent to that chapter, often by illuminating its insurmountable trickiness rather than resolving it. The body of each chapter includes a range of text types including images, literary quotes, recollections, reflections, theoretical overviews, analogies and excerpts from interview transcripts. In theory:

> as each layer of text is superimposed on the others, each layer contributes to the understanding of the other layers as well as to the overall picture of social life that the text conveys. (Ronai, 1999, p. 116)

I explain what I hope to achieve in doing this in 6.11. You can be the judge of whether this method achieves my aims. In fact, you can be the judge of the whole thing. You'll make your own decision as to how you propose to do that, of course, but you might find it helpful to look at the poststructurally inclined quality criteria I've set out in 6.16. I have used them to guide my

work. You are welcome to use them to guide your judgement of my work if you wish.

## 1.5 Dramatis personae

The following pen portraits of key 'characters' in my thesis are based on recollections provided by my contributors, artefacts and archived records. I use the term 'character' and the heading 'dramatis personae' to remind you that that the people I animate though my writing, as children, mothers, teachers, pupils and adults are, inevitably, my own constructions.

*Blakelaw School*

Blakelaw Comprehensive School was born in 1965, the offspring of two post-war single-sex secondary moderns. The catchment area for the school consisted of a number of large council and social housing estates. During the 80s, Blakelaw had a reputation for being rough and not very academic. In the 90s, the introduction of a suit of 'standard raising' policies underpinned by legislation secured Blakelaw's position as a 'failing' school. In 1996, Ofsted placed the school in 'special measures' and in 1997 Blakelaw was one of 18 schools 'named and shamed' by the incoming Labour Government as the worst in the country. It was closed in 1998 and reopened as Firfield Community School under the new government's Fresh Start policy. The school closed again, this time for good, in 2002.

The versions of Blakelaw contained in this thesis are based on the recollections of my contributors and I, two inspection reports from 1974 and 1996, achieved governmental performance data, local and national print and TV media coverage, social media content and artefacts including campaign materials, newspaper clippings, school reports and photographs.

*Sara*

Sara was a pupil at Blakelaw in the early to mid 90s. She lived with her family in a council house near the school. Sara's Dad, a former Army physical

training instructor taught Sara skills in self-defence and hand to hand combat when she was a child. Sara was known as the 'hardest girl in the school' which means she was really good at fighting and / or looking after herself and therefore not to be messed with. When she was 14 Sara spent a summer on the Oglala Lakota Sioux Reservation in South Dakota as part of a project that aimed to improve the delivery of history education. Teachers at Blakelaw organised fundraising events to enable her to take up this opportunity. Sara became involved in political activism during her time at Blakelaw. She left school at 16, did her A Levels at a sixth form college and gained a place at the London School of Economics (LSE) where she went on the gain a first in sociology with the highest marks in her year. Sara works in the North East as a school poverty specialist, campaigner and community organiser.

The version of Sara contained in this thesis is based on the recollections she shared with me in emails (I think we've exchanged around 10) and 2 one hour conversations, one on her own and another with her mam present, a number of Blakelaw related press reports in which she is quoted, some social media content and a print media photograph taken during John Prescott MP's visit to the school in the mid-90s.

*Sara's mam*

Sara's mam and dad still live in the house Sara and her brothers were brought up in. One of 7, she left school at 14 to look after her sister's children. Her family were poor and book loving. She learned to read before she went to school and describes herself as a compulsive reader. Sara's mam played an active role in a campaign to save Blakelaw school from closure in the mid 90s. She considers Blakelaw to have been a very good school both terms of the support and encouragement it gave to Sara and the lengths to which teachers went to find things less academically inclined children could excel in.

The version of Sara's mam contained in this thesis is based on recollections she shared with me during a one hour conversation at her house in which Sara was present, press reports in which she is quoted, Sara's recollections about her mum and a media photograph of Save Our School campaigners during a visit to the region by Tony Blair not long before he became Prime Minster.

*Rob*

During the mid-80s, when Rob was in his mid-teens, he moved from Leeds to the West End of Newcastle with his mam and sister and became a pupil at Blakelaw. Rob was a frequent truant and spent most of the days he did attend school in Blakelaw's 'Scope Unit', a remedial class for children judged to have learning difficulties and/or behavioural problems. Rob left school in the late 80s barely able to read and with one qualification, a CSE grade 3 in art. He met his partner Lucy, a sociology graduate, when he was 17. She helped him learn to read and encouraged him to consider university as an option. Rob and Lucy became parents when he was in his early 20s. Around the same time, he took an Access to Higher Education course and then went on to gain a degree in sociology and social policy. He now works as a clinical auditor within the NHS and recently gained a vocationally focused postgraduate qualification. The couple have four children and still live in the West End of Newcastle.

The version of Rob contained in this thesis is based on the recollections he shared with me during a 2 hour meeting and in around 5 emails about Blakelaw that we exchanged before and after I started this project and my own memories of Rob during and after the Blakelaw years.

*Alan*

Alan left school in the early 90s. He lived in a council house near the school with his mum and his grandmother, who was Canadian and strict. From Blakelaw he went to a Russell Group university though the clearing system

after he gained good grades that were, nevertheless, poorer than predicted having been taught the wrong syllabus for one of his A Levels. He went on to gain a master's degree and a PhD in his 20s and has worked in both industrial and academic settings in the UK and Europe. He currently leads a research and development department within a multinational biosystems equipment company.

The version of Alun contained in this thesis is based on the recollections he shared with me during one meeting and in 2 emails and some social media content.

*David*

My younger brother David left Blakelaw with one GCSE at grade C and the rest at grade D or lower. He left school at 16 and worked as an administrative assistant in the civil service. After 9 years, he applied for a job as a team leader in a newly established mobile phone call centre, exaggerating his management experience on the application form in order to secure himself an interview. He got the job and did well within this field, making his way up the management hierarchy. He gave up his well-paid career in his late 30s and, after trying his hand at running two small businesses, decided to follow a recurring dream to become a teacher. He did a degree with the Open University which enabled him to work around his child care responsibilities, then a PGCE and now works as a primary school teacher.

The version of David contained in this thesis is based on recollections he shared with me during a 2 hour meeting and in several emails, artefacts including school reports and photos, and our mam's recollections of our educational journeys. I have known David since he was a new born baby and I was three and a half. We have had thousands of conversations over the years, all of which are reflected in the version of my brother I present here in one way or another.

*Our mam*

Our mam left secondary modern school aged 15 without any qualifications. Her school reports show that she ranked highly in some subjects and was considered bright but her frequent absences from school affected her performance. She doesn't know whether she passed the 11+ exam or not since her mother (our nana) selected a secondary modern school as a first choice thinking her daughter would feel more at home there than the local grammar school. My mam engaged with Blakelaw throughout our schooling, attending parents' evenings, concerts and special events. She has a positive view of Blakelaw.

The version of our mam presented here is based on numerous conversations relating to my project (I haven't kept tab), some email and text conversations and a range of artefacts which she has kept relating to our schooling and her own. The millions of interactions we've had over the years are all woven into the version of her I present here.

*Mr. T*

My T was my R.E. teacher at Blakelaw. He left his role as a Methodist Minister to retrain as a teacher a few years before I went to Blakelaw. I loved Mr. T and kept in touch with him after I left school. I wouldn't have taken up the opportunity to go to Oxford without his encouragement. Mr. T also features in Sara's story. Knowing her interest in politics and passion for social justice, he gave her a sociology text book which introduced her to the academic study of poverty, racism and sexism. Mr. T died in the 90s when he was in his late 50s.

The Mr. T I present here is based on recollections, my own and others', social media content and a letter he sent to me when I was an Oxford undergraduate.

*Tim, the Marxist chaplain*

Tim is the Oxford academic who wrote to Mr. T and other teachers in schools in economically disadvantaged areas to invite them to send any bright children interested in theology to visit him for an informal interview. I would never have got into Oxford at that time if he had not granted me a place.

'The Marxist chaplain' is a character based on my memories and a range of artefacts that relate to my getting into Oxford and my time as an undergraduate including letters and photographs. 'Tim', who I introduce in chapter 15, is both the same person and a different person. He is based on my experience of our meeting at his home for the purposes of this project.

*Mr. J*

Mr. J worked as a teacher at Blakelaw in the 80s and 90s. He contacted me and gently challenged me after I published a blog post about my time at Blakelaw a few years before I started my PhD. Mr. J considered the school to have been an excellent, caring school and 'a beacon in the community'.

The version of Mr. J contained in this thesis is based on our email correspondence that pre and post-dates the commencement of my PhD.

*Others*

Many other characters appear in my thesis including close and less close family members, former teachers, friends, people who were less than friendly to us, colleagues, politicians, educationalists, and a range of musicians, writers and other artists, most of whom I have never met. The versions of them and everyone and everything contained in this thesis are shaped by my relationships with them and everyone and everything I have ever experienced over the past 49 years.

## 1.6 One last thing before we crack on…

Finally, Reader, I encourage you to actively engage with this thesis. You are a crucial component of it. Perhaps you'll spot connections that I can't see. Maybe, by thinking with the theories I present here, your own journey through formal educational will begin to take on a different form or tone. What once seemed surprising might begin to look quite understandable. And what you once took for granted about yourself might now appear remarkable. Do let me know.

# Chapter 2

## A summary of a story about a possibly amazing educational journey

*Remembering isn't like visiting a museum: Look! There's the long-gone object in a glass case. Memory isn't an archive. Even a simple memory is a cluster. Something that seemed so insignificant at the time suddenly becomes the key when we remember it at a particular time later. We're not liars or self-deceivers - OK, we are all liars and self-deceivers, but it's a fact that our memories change as we do. Some memories, though, don't seem to change at all. They are sticky with pain. And even when we are not, consciously, remembering our memories, they seem to remember us. We can't shake free of their effect.*

Jeanette Winterson, Christmas Days: 12 Stories and 12 Feasts for 12 Days, 2016

## 2.1 Purpose of this chapter

This chapter provides a version of my own surprising educational journey from Blakelaw pupil to Oxford undergraduate to doctoral researcher. In the process it introduces some of the poststructural ideas that underpin this project. These ideas are imbedded in my autobiographical account rather than set out and examined overtly. (I do this in chapter 4). I hope that by the end of the chapter you will have noticed some of the features of its theoretical framing. I also hope to arouse some curiosity about my surprising educational trajectory and your own. Most importantly of all, I hope you will want to read on.

## 2.2 Introduction to the summary of a story about a possibly amazing journey

This thesis is part of a story. It's a story about the amazing journeys of a handful of people who went from a school, once referred to in a Channel Four documentary as 'the worst in Britain', to university and beyond. Perhaps 'surprising', rather than 'amazing' is a better way to describe the journeys. I think most people would find them surprising, from a distance, at least. Once you get close up to them, examine them from a few different angles, I'm not so sure. I'll let you be the judge. We'll discuss it in chapter 14. There's a lot to get through before then, though, so first things first. Let's start with the story of my own educational journey, not because it's the most surprising – it isn't – but it is the one with which I'm most familiar. I've told versions of it many times before. Hang on a minute, though. I'm working to an 80,000 word limit so I better make it a summary of the story of my journey from 'the worst school in Britain' to university and beyond.

All summaries of stories have to start somewhere. I could have easily started mine in 1913, the year my maternal grandmother and her twin sister were born, the same year my great-grandfather abandoned them and their mother because he didn't believe they were his. Maybe they weren't. Maybe he isn't my great-grandfather. Either way, the consequences of him leaving were

awful and certainly had a bearing on my surprising educational trajectory. Probably. But I'm mindful of the word limit – the university authorities are very strict about that, apparently - so instead I'm going to start the summary of the story of my possibly amazing journey in 1975, the year I turned six and moved with my parents and little brother from a privately rented terraced house in Byker, a working-class neighbourhood in Newcastle upon Tyne's East End, to a three bedroomed maisonette on a social housing estate in the city's West End.

### 2.3 Not minding my 'p's and 'q's

Between 1975 and 1980 I attended Todd's Nook, a small primary school located between two social housing estates a few minutes' walk from the one my family lived on. I liked the school, I liked the teachers, I liked my friends, I never got picked on, I never had a fight. All the children were working class in terms of housing tenure and parental education and employment status. We, the children, however, knew that some of us were better off than others. It showed in your clothes and the way you wore them, whether they fit or were too big or too small, whether they were fashionable, hand-me-downs, shop or market stall bought, clean or dirty. It showed in your hair, whether it was styled by a hairdresser, washed on a regular basis, combed each morning. And it showed in the number and cost of the presents you had for Christmas. I didn't know anyone with a car or anyone who went abroad on holiday so those things were irrelevant. My younger brother David and I were clean, groomed, had market stall, home-made and shop bought clothes (though not expensive brands) and we received a generous amount of presents for Christmas, a reflection of my mam's budgeting talents rather than the size of the budget. She had a part-time job as a shop assistant in a department store and my dad was a warehouse manager. This would have made us 'well off' by Todd's Nook standards had my dad not also been financially responsible for my four half-siblings from his previous marriage.

I don't have a great deal of data beyond relating to this period. Nothing, really, beyond memories, photos and a few school books. I recall being

categorised during my primary school days on three occasions: when, aged 7 or 8, I was loaned a violin and sent to weekly lessons along with a handful of other pupils also deemed to have musical potential; at a parents evening, when a teacher told my mam that I had a reading age below my chronological age; and when, aged 10, I was selected to attend a weekly class called 'Acceleration English' for children who were particularly good at the subject. I remember finding the discussion about books more enjoyable than the reading of the books. This remains the case today. My writing books show signs of what nowadays would probably be identified as dyslexia. Weird recurring spellings, 'p's and 'q's, 'd's and 'b's mixed up, a lively, non-linear imagination. I saw myself as quite clever. I don't recall feeling proud or embarrassed about this. It was simply a fact, as far as I was concerned, which my poor spelling and slow reading didn't undermine for me, my mam or my teachers.

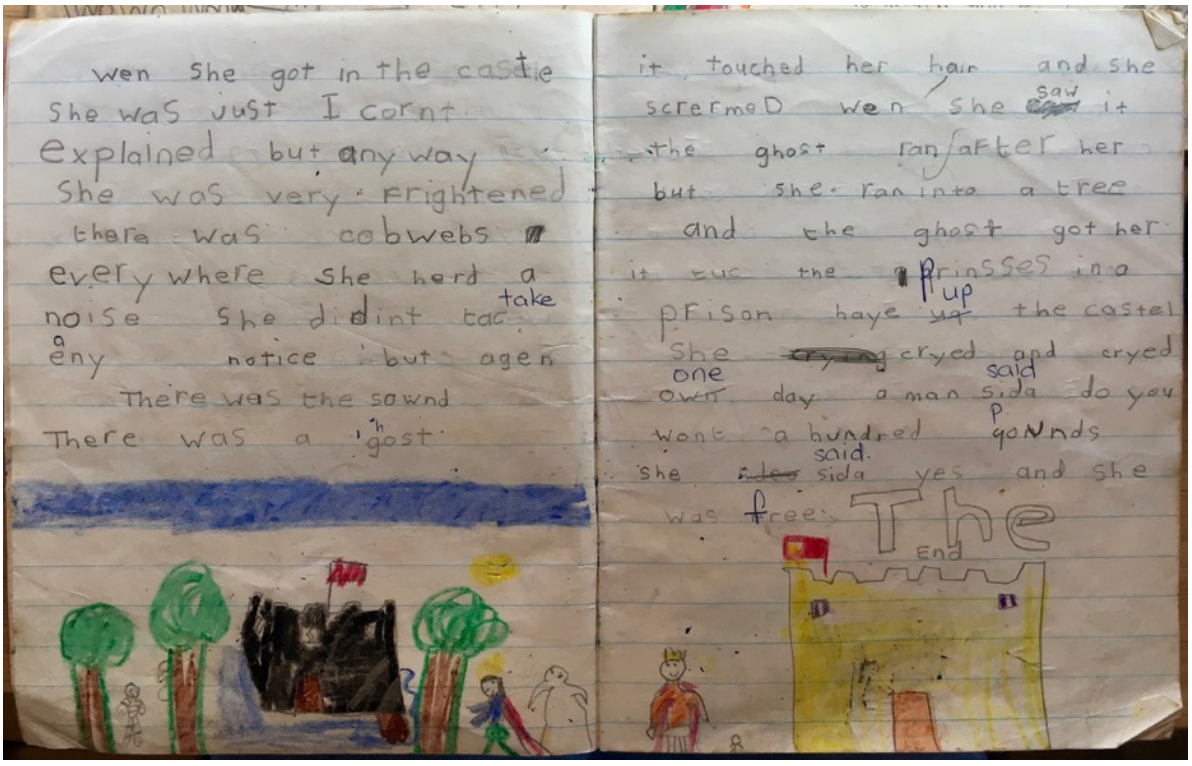



*Figure 1: Excerpt from my writing book circa 1976, personal archive*

## 2.4 ‘A pleasure to have in one’s class’

There was no parental choice policy in 1980 so if you lived in the catchment area and didn’t have a sibling in another school, you were headed for Blakelaw Comprehensive School. The memories I have of my school days are vivid, fragmented, contradictory. They refuse to arrange themselves into a neat narrative. I was aware of Blakelaw’s rough reputation while I was still in primary school. Rumour had it that if you walked near the school at home time Blakelaw pupils would punch you to the ground and steal your shoe laces. I’ve never met anyone who witnessed or experienced such a thing but a few years ago I did meet a woman who’d gone to a ‘better school’ in Newcastle who remembered Blakelaw pupils spitting on children from her school out of the bus window. I hated it in the beginning. I remember being frightened of the ‘hard girls’, the girls who liked to fight and were good at it. My only experience of fighting was with my younger, smaller brother. I wanted to avoid fighting with hard girls at all costs, a desire that could have been dangerous if anyone had sensed my fear. Thankfully, I got away with it. I was randomly thumped from time to time – everyone was – but I managed to get through the whole of school without being bullied or ‘invited’ to have a fight. I consider this an achievement though I’m not sure why because my successful violence avoidance strategy was not a conscious affair. I remember lessons full of noise, drama, laughter, violence and conversation. The violence, or at least my fear of it, decreased over the years. I liked most teachers and I loved and felt loved by two in particular. They had a significant influence on the way I saw myself as a young person and how I see myself as a middle-aged woman today: ‘different’ and mainly in a good way.

Blakelaw operated a mixed ability classroom system for all pupils other than the few who were placed in the remedial unit. The only exceptions to the system were English and maths. I was in the top set for both. This was prior to the introduction of a national curriculum assessment regime so I can’t share my SAT scores with you. My school reports were generally very good. I

was given the top score for ‘effort’ and ‘attainment’ in most subjects (the exceptions being needlework and PE) and while some teachers commented on my excessive talking and laughing I was still, apparently, ‘a pleasure to have in one’s class’. Every year, my mam and dad joked that they’d been given the wrong report: I was quite an argumentative teenager and, I suspect, not always a pleasure to have in one’s home. I assume the teachers’ pleasure in my presence had something to do with me being well behaved (excessive talking and laughing notwithstanding), doing my work, doing it relatively well, and being relaxed in the company of adults, a characteristic I honed, most likely, by going to a church with lots of opportunities for intergenerational socialising. At a parent’s evening when I was 14, a teacher suggested to my mam that my going to university was a realistic prospect. University! Not even polytechnic! The possibility had never occurred to either of us before. “It’s not that I thought you weren’t good enough”, she said to me recently. “It’s just that university didn’t happen to the likes of us”.

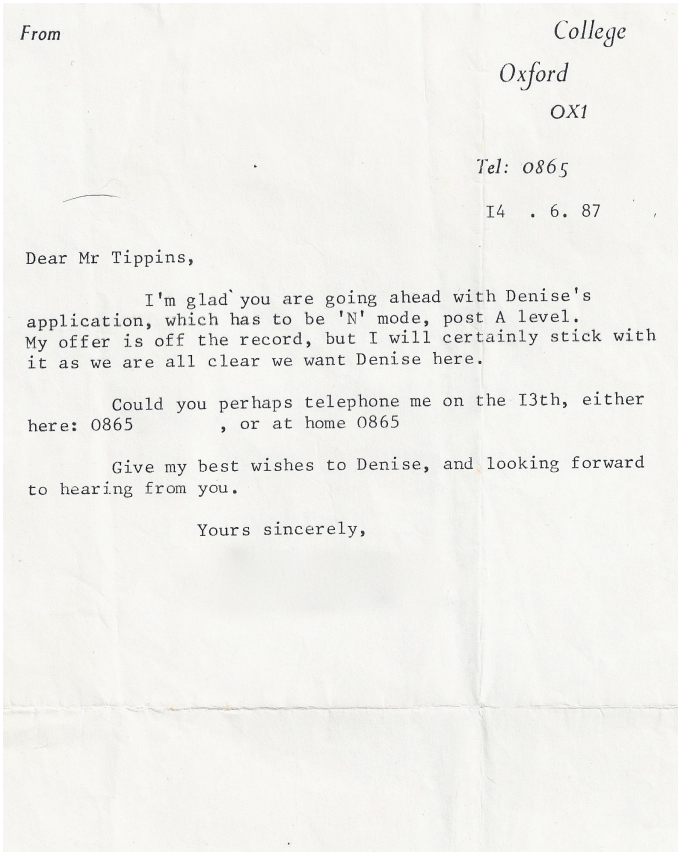
I worked reasonably, but not very, hard, gaining 5 ‘O’ Levels and 5 grade one Certificates in Secondary Education (CSEs) the [alleged] equivalent to a grade C ‘O’ Level at that time. I stayed on to do my ‘A’ levels in Blakelaw’s small sixth form which was mainly geared towards re-sits and vocational courses. I enjoyed the company of the teachers and my fellow sixth formers with whom I shared music tapes and played the card game bridge at lunchtime, an unusual activity, looking back on it, for young people from our background. I have no idea how that came about. By the time I left Blakelaw I loved it.

### 2.5 An unexpected turn of events

From Blakelaw I went on to Oxford University to study theology. No one saw that coming. Like my school, I embodied a number of ‘widening participation indicators’ associated with predicted low academic performance and low levels of participation in higher education, particularly at so-called elite universities: neither of my parents had qualifications; we were a relatively low income family; I went to an academically low achieving state school with a high proportion of children entitled to free school meals located in an area

of social deprivation (Feinstein, 2003a; Feinstein, Duckworth and Sabates, 2004; Chowdry *et al.*, 2010; Sutton Trust, 2011; Boliver, 2013; Jerrim, 2013; Moore, Sanders and Higham, 2013; Crawford and Macmillan, 2014; HEFCE, 2014; HEFCW, 2014). Unlike the 'highly academically successful' working class elite university students in Reay et al's study (2010, p.1104), I achieved a B and 2 grade Es in my A levels, the highest by a hefty margin amongst the four of us who sat them, though not 'amazing' by anyone's standards.

So how did I get into Oxford? This is one version of events. A college chaplain, a Marxist concerned with social justice, contacted my RE teacher who was similarly inclined, to ask if there were any pupils who would like to visit his college. My RE teacher, Mr. T, urged me to take up this unusual opportunity and keep an open mind. So I did. I visited the chaplain in his college rooms once the Oxford academic term had finished. We had a conversation and he must have seen something in me because he wrote to Mr. T just before I sat my 'A' Levels promising that if I applied through official channels at a later date he'd offer me a place.



From College
Oxford
OX1

Tel: 0865

14 . 6. 87

Dear Mr Tippins,

I'm glad you are going ahead with Denise's application, which has to be 'N' mode, post A level. My offer is off the record, but I will certainly stick with it as we are all clear we want Denise here.

Could you perhaps telephone me on the 13th, either here: 0865 , or at home 0865

Give my best wishes to Denise, and looking forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

*Figure 2: Letter from the Marxist chaplain to my RE teacher, personal archive*

My A Level results were lower than predicted and the Oxford chaplain was clearly disappointed but he was true to his word. And so, in 1988 I became an Oxford University undergraduate. A local newspaper covered the story. I didn't want to give an interview but Mr. T persuaded me to do it as it would be good for Blakelaw's reputation. The article opened with the line:

> Denise Rogers is a one off – a shining example of perseverance, determination and achievement. And the answer to a teacher's prayers.

The journalist referred to Blakelaw's bad reputation, my parents' lack of qualifications and my brother David's 'not very academic' nature. She made no mention of the Oxford chaplain's off the record offer or my poor grades.

Avril Deane on Saturday

# Denise aims for the glittering prizes

**BLAKELAW comprehensive school in Newcastle's west end doesn't claim to carry the same academic clout as Eton or Harrow.**

**So imagine the school pride that's accompanied the news of the inner city school's first Oxbridge success.**

DENISE Rogers is a one-off — a shining example of perseverance, determination and achievement. And the answer to a teacher's prayers.

In October this year, she becomes the first pupil ever from Blakelaw comprehensive school on the west side of Newcastle — tough rather than rough, she says — to take up a place at Oxford.

There, at St John's College, she'll be reading theology, no less, and thanking God every step of the way for success she sees not so much as personal as a triumph for her school and its staff.

Yesterday teatime, as schools throughout the region wound up for the weekend, Denise was once again behind a desk in the school she thought she'd left last summer — learning the basics of Greek, of all things, from the master who's been her mentor in her learning years, to prepare her for her greatest challenge.

Syd Tippins, head of religious education at Blakelaw, says the last couple of years have been one of the highlights of his long teaching career.

"It *has* been a bit like Educating Rita, I suppose," he says cheerfully. "But my reward is enormous. I feel a great sense of satisfaction and fulfilment. She's the brightest girl I've ever taught, and I'm delighted for her.

● Denise with her mum and dad, Renee and Eddie Rogers: we never even thought of university, they said. Right — At yesterday's Greek lesson, with teacher and mentor Mr Syd Tippins: a result that's done us all the power of good, he says.

*Figure 3: Letter from the Marxist chaplain to my RE teacher, personal archive*

You can perhaps see from my posture in the clipping that I did not enjoy having my photograph taken. When I read the article I felt uncomfortable at the way I'd been portrayed as someone who had overcome the obstacles associated with a poor, disadvantaged background. For years I would make a point of explaining to people – fellow Oxford students, work colleagues, anyone who expressed a view that I must be very clever – how someone like me had got into Oxford: sheer fluke.

### 2.6 Setting out on a journey without a coat


*Figure 4: 'Britain Sees First Snow of 2017, Northerners Don't Care' by initialdave, © North News and Pictures Ltd.*

There's a joke about people from Newcastle – we're known as Geordies - not feeling the cold. The stereotypical Geordie lass sports a short dress, bare legs and high heels for a night out, regardless of season or weather conditions. It's funny because it's true. If you walk through the city centre on a Saturday night in winter you will see lots of coatless, bare armed people on the streets. Not me though. When people ask why I left Newcastle I tell them I was driven out, my reliance on warm coats and woolly hats in fairly moderate temperatures a disgrace to my Geordie heritage.

I found St. John's College, Oxford cold. Much colder than Blakelaw. I felt ill-equipped to be there. Coatless. I struggled academically, socially,

emotionally. I'd felt 'different' back home but I'd learned to embrace my difference as quirkiness, an indicator of individuality, a sign that I was interesting. My difference in Oxford had an entirely different quality. I remember a conversation with a group of girls in fresher's week that focused on the professions of our fathers. My dad was made redundant in 1985 when I was 16. By that time the arthritis and diabetes he'd had since he was a young man had got the better of him and he never worked in paid employment again, though he did do daily voluntary work at a local hospital for years. I didn't mention the voluntary work. I just said "my dad's on permanent sick but he used to manage a warehouse". My stomach still tenses when I recall the awkward atmosphere those words generated. I met two other people from backgrounds similar to mine. One was a man in his 30s, a former painter and decorator who'd got into St. John's via the Marxist chaplain and Ruskin College, an institution which describes itself as 'fully committed to providing working class education and supporting the Trade Union and Labour Movement'[1]. The other person left at the end of the first year after she lost her sight. Whether a guide dog would have been a feasible option at that point was, she acknowledged to me recently, debatable. It was the style of the relevant tutor's response to her request, she recalls, that she found crushing: "We can't have a dog in college. It might shit on the lawns".

I wanted to leave many times in my first two years and I sometimes felt resentment towards my beloved RE teacher and my family and all the people who were happy I was there but weren't there with me. The Marxist chaplain and I didn't really click, socially or intellectually. I didn't get involved in many extra-curricular activities and he must surely have wondered why he'd bothered giving me a precious place at one of the best universities in the world. I didn't leave, though and in 1991 I gained a 2:2 BA (Hons) in theology. This was a fairly poor degree by the standards of my academically

[1] See Ruskin College website: https://www.ruskin.ac.uk/courses2/tuc-courses-2/apprenticeships-for-trade-unions

high achieving college, an elite establishment within an elite establishment. But it was an Oxford degree. And it was mine.

## 2.7 Failing to make the grade

In the years following my departure from Blakelaw, its reputation as a 'bad school' was officially formulated, documented, archived and politicised. League table data shows that in 1994, 7 years after I'd left, only 7% of pupils gained 5 A*- C grades at GCSE, compared to 43% across England. In the same year 38% of pupils failed to get a single GCSE of any grade compared to 8% in England (Department for Education, 1994). The school was placed in Special Measures in 1996 (Hansard, 1996). In 1997, Blakelaw School had the third worst truancy rate in England (BBC, 1997) and 42% of children in year 10 left school without a single GCSE of any grade (Department for Education 1997). That same year, Blakelaw was one of 18 schools 'named and shamed' by the incoming Labour Government as the worst in the country (Hansard, 1997; Judd, 1997). It closed in 1998 and reopened as Firfield Community School under the New Labour Government's Fresh Start policy, a standard raising initiative targeted at failing schools with poor management and leadership (Araujo, 2009). This caught the attention of the national press, which characterized Blakelaw as weak and failing (e.g. Ward, The Independent 1997; Adamd, TES 1999; Crace, The Guardian 1999). A six-part documentary entitled 'Making the Grade', which aired on Channel Four in winter 1999, charted attempts to 'turn the school around'. This included the appointment of a 'superhead', new members of staff, new equipment and a new uniform. (Screen Ocean, 1999). Efforts to improve the school were deemed inadequate by the powers that be and it closed for good in 2002.

## 2.8 Not moving on

This all happened a long time ago. It's 31 years since I left school and 16 since Blakelaw/Firfield ceased to exist. Three years after I gained my undergraduate degree, I got into Oxford again, this time under the regular application procedure. I left two years later with an MSc in applied social

science and a postgraduate diploma in social work. A few years later my employer funded me to do a postgraduate diploma in management at the University of Wales, Newport. And thirteen years after that I won a funded PhD and MSc scholarship here at Bristol University. So it all worked out for the best in the end. And yet… something about this period of the past grips and unsettles me. Something about it isn't quite right. My feelings and thoughts are complicated and uneven. Sometimes I feel guilty that I didn't make more of the opportunities getting a place at Oxford presented. Sometimes I feel unworthy and embarrassed that it happened to me and not someone who deserved it or indeed wanted it more than I did. Sometimes I feel angry at the lack of support I had around the transition from Blakelaw to Oxford and all it entailed. And sometimes, when people who didn't experience either Blakelaw or Oxford say negative things about them, I feel defensive, protective of them, as if they are annoying relatives that only I and other members of the family are allowed to criticize.

I always feel ambivalent, unresolved, bothered.

…….

## 2.9 Moving on

*Mr. B once punched me full on in the face. He was a proper tekka.*

*RIP Mr. B*

[Post from the Facebook page I survived Blakelaw School, since removed]

| Tekka: Noun (Geordie) - teacher |
|---|

My initial doctoral research proposal focussed on the awarding of PhD scholarships from a Bourdieusian theoretical perspective. Over the course of my first year of study, it became increasingly clear that the idea that had persuaded the gatekeepers within the School of Education to award me a scholarship, whilst relevant and interesting, was unfeasible. My requests to

sit in on meetings in which academics made decisions about the awarding of funded PhD places were denied, even within my own department. So I set about thinking of another research project, something that would enable me to make the most of my previous learning, where access wouldn't be a problem, something I'd find interesting and important enough to drive me to hold my nerve for the next few years.

…….

I start to trawl social media sites looking for evidence of former Blakelaw pupils who, like me, had ended up going to university 'against the odds'. I draw a blank and become distracted by a Facebook page called *I survived Blakelaw School*. It contains funny, probably libellous, recollections about the teachers who worked there in the 80s and 90s and conversational threads with titles like 'Where you a c#&t in school?', written exactly like that. I am about to give up when I notice this:

> *Blimey...brings back lots of memories. I left in '95 and my form tutor was Mr. B. He was a lovely bloke, bit like an army major but really did care for us lot. He stopped speaking to me after the school strike - sorry!! Won't have a bad word said about the place tho. think it was a great school, it's a scandal what they did to it! Did me no harm went on to get a 1st from the LSE (and the twitch is wearing off!!).*

I immediately check out the schools performance statistics. In 1995 less than 11% of eligible students gained 5 A*-C GCSEs in Blakelaw, compared to 44% across England as a whole. 43% of eligible Blakelaw pupils failed to obtain a single GCSE. And she got a first from the LSE? How did she pull that off?

This encounter is a turning point. I'll track down this former pupil, I decide, see if she's willing to contribute to a research project focused on the surprising educational trajectories of former Blakelaw pupils. I find Sara quickly and easily. She goes by the name she had in school and, as a social justice campaigner and policy lead for a regional charity, has a sizable

internet footprint. I email her, sketching out my own experience of going from Blakelaw to an elite university and asking her why she thinks it happened for her. Sara's response a few days later seals my fate:

*Hi Denise,*

*Thanks for getting in touch and for the really fascinating email!!*

*It's a subject close to my heart and I currently manage the child poverty programme of work for a regional charity. One of the strands of work was developing a 'poverty proofing the school day' programme which we deliver into schools to remove the stigma and discrimination that poorer students face. I've been in a school all this week – really interesting stuff! It's a peer led audit of policy and practice (cost of uniforms, resources, transport, school trips, how homework is set, assumptions about internet access etc). So all very relevant to your field of study.*

*Similarly I ended up in this line of work because of my own experiences growing up in poverty and spending many years pondering how I escaped it when so many of my peers didn't. I left Newcastle aged 18 and moved to London to study at the LSE. I graduated top of my class with a First Class degree. Stayed in London worked for a think tank and the Department for Education, and then the Children's Commissioner for England. I re-settled in the North East after the birth of my son in 2008.*

*So I have loads to share with you and would love to be part of the study. I'd be equally interested in the findings too! I have two friends who also went to Uni from Blakelaw School who I can put you in touch with from my year group (I left in 1995). My parents still live in Blakelaw so happy to ask about for any contacts from other year groups too!*

The die is cast. I have a new PhD project. I exhale slowly. The sense of certainty will be temporary, I know, but I am determined to enjoy this feeling while I can.

*Figure 5: The place where Blakelaw School once stood, DAR, July 2015*

# Chapter 3

## How I became poststructurally inclined before I'd heard of poststructuralism

*[H]ow is it that we become available to a transformation of who we are, a contestation of which compels us to rethink ourselves, a reconfiguration of our 'place' and our 'ground'?'*

(For a Careful Reading, Judith Butler 1995)

## 3.1 Purpose of this chapter

This chapter introduces an idea that runs through the entire thesis: that there is no conceptual or practical separation of researcher, object of the inquiry and methodology within this project. It is interrupted by chapter 4 which outlines the key poststructural concepts that underpin my methodology and explores their implications for the social researcher. Chapter 5 picks up where this one breaks off to illustrate the premise that a range of childhood and early adulthood experiences produced in me a 'poststructurally inclined' worldview long before I formally encountered academic poststructural thinking. And that the development of these traits may have been part of the conditions of possibility under which I went to university.

## 3.2 My methodological positionality

In her inaugural lecture to the Ontario Institute Critical Qualitative Education Research Community, Patti Lather challenged the 'old chestnut' that research question determines methodology, 'as if your methodological positionality doesn't have a huge shaping influence on the kind of questions you ask.' (Lather 2012, 27 mins). My methodological positionality is 'poststructural': I have a preference for poststructural approaches to inquiry over those framed within other philosophical frameworks. I use the term 'poststructural' broadly to encompass poststructural, posthuman, postcolonical, queer and new-material approaches for reasons I explain in 4.3.

I didn't choose a poststructural methodology for this project because I thought it the best way of addressing some research questions formulated in response to a gap in the literature: the questions I ask through, and of, my thesis are questions I became 'able to hear' (St. Pierre, 2001, p. 141) as a result of my encounters with poststructural thinking and practices.

I first came across the term poststructuralism and the constellation of ideas and concerns associated with it in my 40s. For a long time, I struggled to

understand its unfamiliar and often complicated prose. I still do. And yet I was immediately receptive to the exciting, if a little out of focus, worldview it presented. I'm dyslexic and find reading a tiring activity, even when the ideas explored in the text are expressed in familiar language. It is remarkable that the poststructurally framed articles and books I picked up in the early days somehow held my attention.

The following quotation is a 'mash-up' of poststructural ideas written by Elisabeth St. Pierre (its curator, you might say), Richard Rorty and Michel Foucault. I came across it after encountering poststructuralism as a way of thinking about the world and I've have returned to it many times:

> As Rorty (1986) eloquently explained, "if we once took seriously the notion that we only know the world and ourselves under a description" (p. 48), we might choose to rewrite that description and then perhaps re-describe the world and ourselves. In other words, we could refuse to repeat the same descriptions. Perhaps we could be-do-live something different. This is the agency, the freedom of the posts, to "refuse what we are" (Foucault in Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982, p. 216), what we do, the world we create. And, as Foucault noted, once we understand that, our work becomes very urgent, very difficult, and quite possible. (St.Pierre 2014, p.5)

I find this passage hopeful, radical, provocative and potentially revolutionary. I asked my girlfriend to read it yesterday. (We have much in common and love to discuss the human condition and the meanings of life.) She was unmoved by it. Judith Butler asks 'how is it that we become available to a transformation of who we are, a contestation of which compels us to rethink ourselves, a reconfiguration of our 'place' and our 'ground'?' (1995, p.131). Why, of all the ideas I've encountered since I came to Bristol, many of which I have found to be intellectually and ethically persuasive, is it the poststructurally framed ideas that I respond to emotionally, imaginatively, physically as well as intellectually?

I have spent some time musing on this question. I can recall a number of experiences which, over the course of my childhood and early adulthood, shaped and nourished what could be seen as poststructural inclinations, traits or predispositions. I'm going to share some of these musings with you because I suspect they might have contributed to the 'conditions of possibility' in which my own surprising educational trajectory has played out. But before I do that I want to set out some of the key poststructural concepts that underpin my methodology and explore their implications for the social researcher. I think that'll provide a useful lens through which you can view what's to come and what you've already read.

# Chapter 4

# Some key poststructural ideas that underpin this project and their implications for the social researcher

*Inquire if a thing be necessary*
*Especially if it is common*
*We particularly ask you —*
*When a thing continually occurs —*
*Not on that account to find it natural*
*Let nothing be called natural*
*In an age of bloody confusion,*
*Ordered disorder, planned caprice,*
*And dehumanized humanity, lest all things*
*Be held unalterable!*

(Bertolt Brecht, The Exception and the Rule, 1930  1930)

## 4.1 Purpose of this chapter

This chapter provides an outline of the main poststructural concepts, assumptions and preferences that underpin my project. It then goes on to explore the implications of poststructural thinking for 'empirical' or 'data-driven' social research. This will, I hope, provide a lens through which you can read and engage with the thesis and a 'measure' against which you can judge the quality and value of my work. You are, of course, free to judge my work in any way you want. If, for example, you equate 'goodness' with generalisability and usefulness to policy makers, my project is not going to fare very well. My aim is not to persuade you that you are wrong but to equip you with tools to help you consider the advantages of a poststructural approach.

## 4.2 A poststructuralist methodology as a folding bike

Perhaps an analogy would be helpful here. Let's say you are about to set out on a journey and I have been charged with providing you with a means of getting around. I present you with a folding bike and talk enthusiastically about its benefits. It'll enable you to gain a good sense of the topography of the places you visit. You'll be able to travel both on and off road which will allow you to get to places located off the beaten track. The bike is light and transportable which means you'll be able to use it in conjunction with other modes of transport like a train or a car if someone is kind enough to offer you a lift. I'll tell you that, in my experience, people are intrigued by folding bikes and will stop you to ask how yours works which might lead to interesting conversations and an invite to dinner from a local, perhaps. Plus, you're going to get fit riding that bike every day.

I will also acknowledge the disadvantages of a folding bike. There's a limit to how many miles you're going to be able to cover each day. They can be uncomfortable if the place you're visiting has a lot of hills or roads in need of repair. And mentally tiring at times because you'll have to make decisions every time you come to a crossroads or notice a dangerous but interesting

looking alley. I'll admit that getting lost from time to time will be inevitable if you are the sort of person who's inclined to cycle down dangerous but interesting looking alleys. I'll also warn you that you'll feel lonely at times: chances are you won't see many other people using a folding bike to get around. Although, on the occasions where you do, you'll smile and wave as you pass one another, which is very enjoyable.

Now you might say, I'd prefer a car - I need something sturdier, more reliable, something that will enable me to cover large distances with more room because I like to travel with other people for company. I'll say, fair enough. Probably best if you ask someone else to arrange your transport next time you go on a trip. But I'll also urge you to give the folding bike a go. See if there are aspects of the experience you enjoy, things you wouldn't be able to do if you were travelling by car. What I hope you won't do is tell me that the folding bike is rubbish because it won't go over 20mph, has nowhere to stow your suitcase and is a liability on a motorway.

That make sense? Good. I'm going to give you a demonstration of how the folding mechanism works – it's fairly straight forward once you get the hang of it but there is a knack if you want to avoid ending up with a useless pile of metal and rubber.

Off we go.

### 4.3 Poststructuralism: some important assumptions

Poststructuralism is a messy entanglement of concepts, terminology and practices. Poststructural writing is characterised by long sentences, neologisms and a tendency to pick at and undermine its own conclusions. The poststructurally inclined do not like to be pinned down. Few of the key thinkers whose work is associated with poststructuralism - Derrida, Foucault, Butler for instance – have attached the label to themselves. Poststructuralism is as much about what it is not as what it is, but describing what it is and is not is tricky since 'refusing definition is part of the theoretical scene' (Lather,

2007, p. 5). None of this stops those who work within a poststructural paradigm from trying: attempting to do things you know will ultimately fail is also part of the theoretical scene.

Laurel Richardson describes poststructuralism as a ‘particular kind of postmodernist thinking’ which holds at its core:

> the doubt that any method or theory, any discourse or genre, any tradition or novelty has a universal and general claim as the "right" or privileged form of authoritative knowledge. Postmodernism suspects all truth claims of masking and serving particular interests in local, cultural, and political struggles. (2005, p.961)

Poststructuralism embraces this doubt in a particular way linking ‘language, subjectivity, social organization, and power’ (ibid). Maggie MacLure describes both postmodernism and poststructuralism as postfoundational approaches associated with ‘the ruins’. The ruins are:

> ‘a kind of shorthand for the crumbling edifice of Enlightenment values that have regulated theory and research for two centuries, such as belief in reason and progress, unmediated access to truth, and the agency of the centered, humanist self.’ (MacLure 2011, p.997)

Lather also associates poststructuralism with the challenges it poses to enlightenment assumptions:

> It particularly foregrounds the limits of consciousness and intentionality and the will to power inscribed in sense-making efforts that aspire to totalizing explanatory frameworks, especially structuralism with its ahistoricism and universalism (ibid, p.5).

I have used the term ‘poststructural’ as an inclusive umbrella term to describe a range of related theoretical approaches including poststructuralism, posthumanism, new materialism, queer theory and postcolonialism. This decision reflects my non-linear, ‘diffractive’ (Barad

2012 – more of that in chapter 10) relationship with these approaches. I encountered them around the same time and read them into one another. So, for example, my slow grasping of Barad's new materialist take on agency enhanced my reading of Foucault's subject. And Haraways's posthuman rejection of the human/animal and human/technology binaries enlivened my understanding of Derrida's deconstruction. I appreciated the differences in legacy and focus; the posthuman conceptualisation of life as a multi-bodied continuum incorporating the technological, biological and non-biological; new materialism's mission to redress the imbalance in focus on language over matter; queer theory's focus on the performance and control of gender, sex and sexuality; postcolonialism's on the legacies of colonialism and imperialism. I saw that, very generally speaking, new materialism and post-humanism were more heavily influenced by the writings of Deleuze than queer theory and post-colonialism which seemed more engaged by ideas associated with Foucault, Derrida and feminist cultural studies. But I saw nothing in the poststructuralist writings I engaged with over the course of my PhD study that excluded any of these approaches theoretically. I saw them as positioned close together, all 'similarly different', onto-epistemologically speaking, to approaches underpinned by a traditional humanist worldview. 'Poststructuralism' has always been weighty for me, bound up with matter and feeling and place and time in all its entangled complexity.

Only recently did I come to appreciate that for some researcher-writers, the differences between these approaches is important - practically, emotionally and bodily - in terms of the responses they elicit. This might come down to the differences in emphasis I've outlined above but I suspect it also has something to do with differences in the way they encountered and experienced these approaches over time. Maybe they worked within a poststructural framework for years, frustrated by what they experienced as a blinkered focus on language and a neglect of some topics. Maybe the advent of new materialism and post-humanist or a shift to using queer theory or postcolonial theory quenched their thirst for something different, something

more. In light of this, I have started to use the term 'post theory' rather than poststructuralism as an umbrella term when presenting my work. I did consider making the change within the thesis but I decided against it. My 'post' positioning requires me to draw your attention to, rather than hide, the traces and imprints of previous understandings, relationships, decisions from which this document emerged. And so I've let it stand as a performance of my post/poststructural positioning.

The descriptions provided by Richardson, MacLure and Lather, whilst partial, do capture the interrelated theoretical assumptions and preferences that underpin my research methodology: that language in its broadest sense does not simply correspond with 'reality' but produces it; that scepticism is the proper response to claims of authority and truth; that power is multidirectional, both restrictive and productive; that subjectivity – the making of 'the self' - is a dynamic, relational affair; and that categorisation practices that overstate differences and similarities should be resisted because intersections, configurations and context are more analytically fruitful.

### 4.4 Language as constitutive of reality

Derrida once wrote (in French, of course – these are translations):

> "There is nothing outside the text" or "there is no outside to the text" (Derrida, 1976, p. 158)

This encapsulates the poststructuralist assumption that 'reality does not precede representation but is constituted by it' (Lather, 2003, p. 259). In other words, language does not reflect a world that exists independently of it: it creates the world and our knowledge of it. This is an 'onto-epistemological' worldview in that it rejects the distinction between ontology (theories about what exists) and epistemology (theories about what can be *known* about what exists). Language, the poststructurally inclined posit, works through an unstable system of perceived differences anchored to

binary oppositions, e.g. individual/social, men/women, theory/practice, thought/feeling, general/specific, quantitative/qualitative. Meaning, however, is not as fixed as it appears. It is highly contextual, ambiguous and, since concepts can only be defined in relation to other concepts, endlessly deferred. This ambiguity is often hidden or obscured by dominant interpretations that come to be seen as real, fixed and natural, e.g. the hitherto 'fact' that there are two genders that correspond to the two sex categories of female and male.

This sounds close to Gramsci's notion of hegemony (e.g. see Loomba 2005, pp.28–31), except that from a poststructuralist perspective there is no objectively true (i.e. ahistorical – true always and everywhere) state of affairs to be uncovered. The poststructurally inclined may well be concerned about the *effects* of truth claims about gender and sex but they do not seek to uncover the 'objective' truth because the 'reality' of gender, including its very existence as a thought category, is contextual and unfixed. And so:

> for both Foucault and Derrida, critique does not begin with the assumption that what exists is wrong or in error; rather, critique examines the assumptions that structure the discursive and the non-discursive, the linguistic and the material, words and things, the epistemological and the ontological in order to foreground the historicity and, so, the unnatural nature of what exists. (St. Pierre, 2014, pp. 4–5)

Derrida argued that all concepts and ideas will eventually 'deconstruct', i.e. reveal themselves to be more ambiguous than they appear (Derrida and Caputo, 1997). When deconstruction occurs, concepts, hierarchies, things that have previously appeared fixed and natural become unstable, inconsistent, questionable. Eventually, a new set of referents, assumptions and meanings take hold.

The poststructurally inclined, do not deny the existence of the material or bodies or events or time:

> The concept of text or of context which guides me embraces and does not exclude the world, reality, history. Once again (and this probably makes a thousand times I have had to repeat this, but when will it finally be heard, and why this resistance?): as I understand it (and I have explained why), the text is not the book, it is not confined in a volume itself confined to the library. It does not suspend reference—to history, to the world, to reality, to being, and especially to the other. (Derrida 1981, p.137 in St. Pierre 2014)

They - we - do, however, reject the notion that the 'real' exists in a fixed form outside human interpretation. This is as much the case for the concepts associated with the natural sciences - particles and waves in physics for example (see Barad, 2007) - as it is for those at play within the social sciences and social life in general.

Within the context of my project, the terms 'failing school', 'deprived area', 'valuing education', 'bright pupil', 'good teacher' and 'educational outcomes' are of particular interest. From a poststructural perspective, the political and social apparatus that give meaning to these terms - examinations, qualifications, league tables, job descriptions, media reports, laws, policies, ministerial statements (all 'texts' from a Derridian perspective) – reflect, produce and reproduce assumptions and interpretations that have real consequences: schools are closed, CVs are tainted and the potential futures available to children labeled as bright, hardworking, challenging or of low ability, are constrained.

### 4.5 Scepticism towards claims of authority

The poststructurally inclined suspect that all claims to truth – any theory, tradition, philosophical tenet, law, system of categorisation, statement issued by an authority or person 'in authority', or dominant worldview presented as 'common sense' or neutral – of 'masking and serving particular interests in local, cultural, and political struggles' (Richardson 2005, p.961). This suspicion produces a desire to scrutinise dominant knowledge claims

and methods of knowledge production in terms of the interests they serve and the alternative ways of knowing that they supress. In this sense poststructural thinking is unavoidably political.

### 4.6 An anti-utopian position: everything is potentially dangerous

Poststructural thinking is unavoidably political, yes, but not tribally so. The poststructurally inclined are unlikely to find a permanent home amongst any group or institution attached to identity, intellectual position, political affiliation or social background. This is not to say that poststructural thinking is relativist or nihilist: many famous poststructural thinkers have engaged in activism against forms of social organisation they believed to be particularly damaging or unjust: Judith Butler, for example, has described herself as a 'feminist scholar and activist' (Jaschik, 2017). It is to say that a poststructuralist worldview is anti-utopian. For the poststructurally inclined 'everything is dangerous' (Foucault, 1994, p.256) because:

> there are no cultural practices that are not defined by frameworks that are 'caught up in conflicting networks of power, violence, and domination' (Baker, 1995, p. 129). (Lather, 2003, p. 258)

The poststructural positioning of my project requires a scepticism towards the evidence of Blakelaw's failure as a school contained in archived performance records, media outputs and political debates. More challengingly for me as a researcher who has previously worked within a more traditional qualitative paradigm, it also prevents me from taking the accounts of school and personal journey provided by my contributors on the basis of their recollections as 'true' in any straightforward sense.

### 4.7 Subjectivity as a dynamic, fragmented, relational affair

Poststructural theory rejects the notion of a subject which is 'either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history' (Foucault in Rabinow 1984, p.59). In other words, people do not possess essential characteristics that

are fixed across time and space. We are formed and re-formed as subjects in relation to discourses which:

> 'systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault, 1972, p. 49), including identities. (St. Pierre, 2008, p. 327)

Children with special educational needs, for example, exist as a discrete category as a result of the discourses (including policies, laws, practices and terminology) that identify them and process them as such. Similarly, the term 'bright pupil' does not describe the essence of a child nor the skills and ability she possesses. A 'bright pupil' is created by and within a complex web of testing and qualification regimes, notions of good behaviour, punishment regimes, assumptions about the purpose of education and the nature of intelligence, economic systems and material settings. Of course, an individual might get trapped within a particular subject position for their entire life. Subject positions are 'sticky'. Nevertheless, what it 'means' to be bright or to have 'special needs' is contextually bound and subject to change.

Judith Butler's poststructurally inclined conceptualisation of the subject focuses on the performances which accord to established social conventions - what we 'do' rather than what we 'are' - most famously in relation to the performance of gender (Butler, 2006). Children positioned as bright pupils tend to perform as bright pupils without being consciously aware that they are acting in ways that adhere to dominant discourses regarding the notions of good behaviour, intelligence and hard work.

In contrast to the reflective, self-conscious, coherent subject that underpins many of the traditional practices associated with qualitative research, the poststructurally conceived of person is largely unaware of their positioning and their performativity. Their way of being in the world, as a teenager, a pupil, a mother, a woman is experienced as natural and essential.

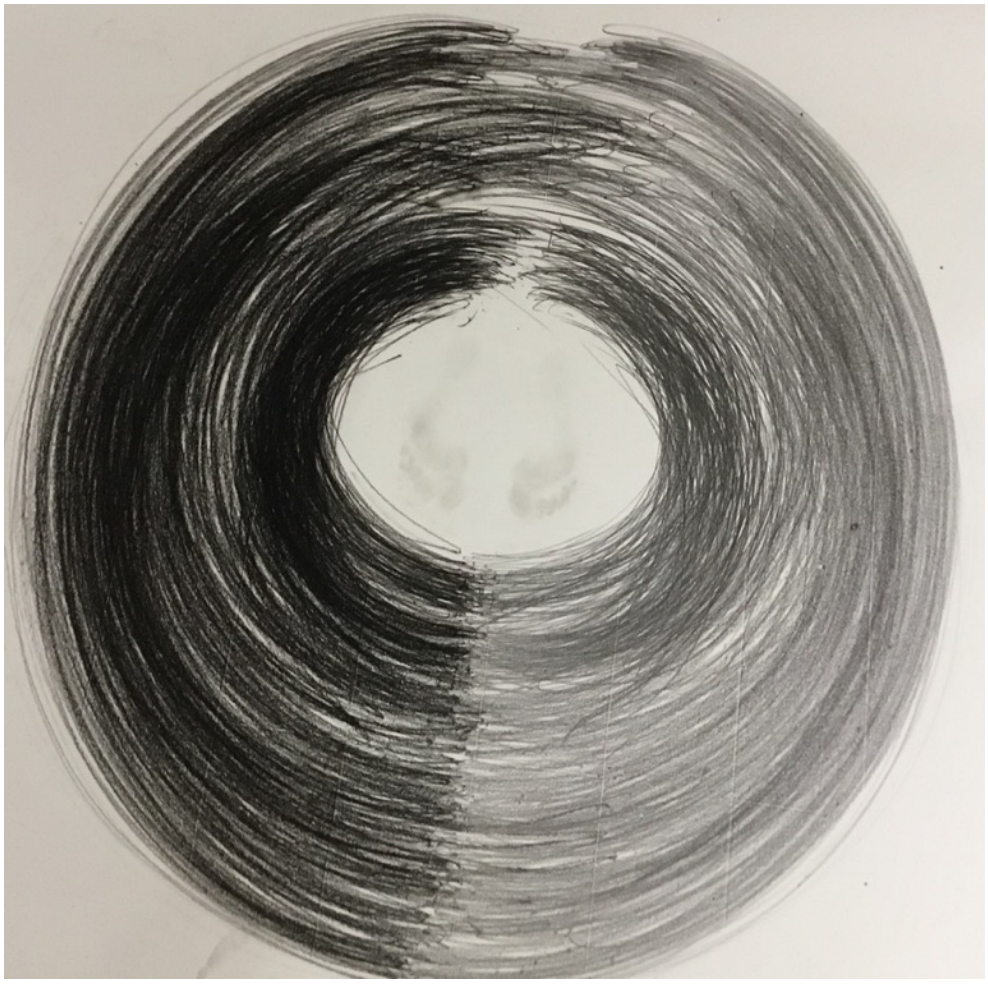


*Figure 6: You are Here, Marega Palser, 2018*

## 4.8 Power as a multidirectional, restrictive and productive

From a poststructural perspective, power is practiced within a relational system and therefore multidirectional and dynamic rather than something possessed by 'powerful individuals'. Power flows within and across the complex systems in which people are enmeshed. The operation of power relations does not require the conscious awareness of those implicated in it because discourses incorporate truth claims that:

> underpin attempts to persuade groups and cultures to one view or judgment, for example, to a particular perspective on sexuality, form of worship, models of health, and so forth. Language comes to serve these authoritative bodies of knowledge so that they become more and more closed to challenge. (Fox, 2008, p. 443).

From this point of view, knowledge is not the uncovering of a 'true state of affairs' but rather the product of practices that create subjects which can be known. Power flows though the apparatus of the school system - central and local government policies, qualification and assessment regimes, league tables, the subject positions of teacher, pupil and researcher – to produce knowledge about schools, pupils and teachers who are subsequently positioned as failing, excellent, poorly performing, let down, challenging, disengaged, poor, the brightest and best.

Importantly, Foucault's conceptualisation of power is not simply repressive:

> What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression. (Foucault in Rabinow 1984, p.61)

For example, to be enmeshed, as a pupil, in the power relations associated with school produces opportunities to inhabit existing positions of 'high

achiever', a 'hard worker', or, in the case of Sara, one of my research contributors, 'the hardest girl in the school'. Power relations also enable resistance as subjects push at the boundaries of available positions – what it 'means' to be bright, to be dyslexic, to be privileged or violent:

> This is the agency, the freedom of the posts, to "refuse what we are" (Foucault, 1982, p. 216), what we do, the world we create. (St. Pierre, 2014, p. 5)

## 4.9 Resistance to categorisation practices that overstate differences and similarities

The poststructurally inclined have a preference for approaches that foreground context, intersections, relationality, contingency and uncertainty over those that favour categories, types, instances and the identification of 'resemblance or difference among already-formed entities' (MacLure, 2011, p. 999). Deleuze & Guattari characterised traditional, modernist approaches to knowing as arborescent – tree like - whilst poststructural epistemologies are better illustrated by the rhizome metaphor (1987):

> To be rhizomorphous is to produce stems and filaments that seem to be roots, or better yet connect with them by penetrating the trunk, but put them to strange new uses. We're tired of trees. We should stop believing in trees, roots, and radicles. They've made us suffer too much. All of arborescent culture is founded on them, from biology to linguistics. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 1)

This is an over-simplistic analogy, of course, a binary that places non-categorical thinking above categorical thinking. Whilst we might prefer the former, we must also acknowledge that even the poststructurally inclined need categories to think with: how else would we differentiate ourselves from traditional humanists or positivists and how could the idea of 'feminist' poststructuralism, for example, make sense? The key, for the poststructurally inclined is the acceptance that categories are (con)textual,

unfixed and inevitably rooted in thinking that over- and under-emphasises similarities and differences within and between them. Within the context of this project, I aim to probe and unsettle the categories associated with notions of dis/advantage, in/capability, and the un/expected. To do so, I will follow Derrida in arguing that this anti-categorical thinking is an act of resistance and an ethical one at that:

> I absolutely refuse a discourse that would assign me a single code, a single language game, a single context, a single situation; and I claim this right not simply out of caprice or because it is to my taste, but for ethical and political reasons. (Derrida cited in Morrisey 1999, p.81)

## 4.10 Social research from the 'ruins': methodological implications of a poststructural positioning

Many terms that hold currency within the field of social research are problematic from a poststructural perspective that embraces the 'disintegration of a secure distinction between language and reality' (MacLure 2011, p. 997),

> How to describe, analyse or deconstruct something which does not exist in any fixed form prior to inscription? How do we 'interpret' when as it were can no longer be interpreted? What to do about methods and instruments and notions of validity when correspondence theory is no longer a meaningful pivot? What do we do with our 'findings' and how do we tell their story? How do we share our knowledge in ways that acknowledge the crisis? (Petersen, 2014, p. 147)

What to do next?

## 4.11 To throw it away or to ~~keep it?~~

Some researchers have had enough. Denzin asks his readers to 'imagine a world without data, a world without method, a world without a hegemonic politics of evidence, a world where no one counts, a world without end'

(Denzin, 2013, p. 353). St. Pierre has described how, in 2011, she coined the deliberately 'rather large and ambiguous term' 'post-qualitative' to highlight what she saw as the incommensurability of conventional humanist qualitative methodology and 'the posts' (2014, p.3). In recent years she advised her own poststructurally inclined doctoral students:

> to just refuse that methodology, to give it up, to try to unlearn it, forget it, get it out of their minds. It had become totalizing, even oppressive, and was shutting them down. (2014, p.10)

She warns us that there can be 'no recipe, no text book', 'no "research design" or "research process" to take us through the steps necessary to 'do' a Derridean deconstruction or a Foucauldian genealogy' (p.10). All we can do, she argues, is follow the 'epistemological and ontological commitments' (p.10) of our chosen theory:

> I assure them that if they've studied the theory carefully their "methodology" will follow. (2014, p.10)

Walking away is not the only option. One might instead opt to retain traditional research terminology whilst troubling, erasing, warping and repurposing it. This is what Derrida referred to as writing 'sous rature' which Gaytari Spivak translates as 'under erasure'. To write sous rature, she explains:

> is to write a word, cross it out, and then print both word and deletion. (Since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible.) [.....] In examining familiar things we come to such unfamiliar conclusions that our very language is twisted and bent even as it guides us. Writing "under erasure" is the mark of this contortion. (Spivak 1976 in the Translater's preface to On Grammatology, Derrida 1976, p.xiv)

For reasons I will explain when I come to talk about my methodology in chapter 6, this is the approach I have opted to take. Through the rest of this

chapter, I place some traditional research terminology sous rature to see what begins to emerge.

### 4.12 Poststructural data and analysis

In light of the 'crisis of representation' (Marcus & Fisher 1986) that results from a worldview that rejects the idea that language represents or corresponds with what already exists, it makes no sense to conceptualise data as evidence which is 'out there', pre-formed and waiting to be noticed, gathered and interpreted. From a poststructuralist perspective, that which we construct or appoint as data – e.g. audio recordings, interview transcripts, policy documents, and archived performance records - are always already interpretations, always already the product of power relations, always already dislocated from the contexts of their production, always already 'laden with theory, values, history, culture, politics and power' (St. Pierre 2013, p. 225). From a poststructural perspective, data in any form are not 'things that can be collected, coded and analyzed; data are processes constructed by the researcher's interpretive practices' (Denzin, 2013, p. 355). This perspective blurs the boundary between the notions of 'data collection' and 'analysis' since both are interpretative acts, and often over-lapping. This is not to say that one cannot carry out and present the results of a conscious act of analysis. That is precisely what I've attempted to do in chapters 9, 11 and 13. But it is to acknowledge that the data I analyze in those chapters are themselves the products of my thinking with various theories in mind, which is an act of analysis in itself. And that the presentations of my analysis also create data in the form of new configurations of story, image and artefact. The poststructurally informed researcher is going to struggle to structure their thesis or report according to a traditional format that separates components like background, theoretical framework, methodology, findings and discussion.

### 4.13 The poststructural subject

The poststructural conceptualisation of the subject presents particular challenges for those of us who use language-based data. The challenge is particularly keen in relation to voice-based data – that is data generated by the speaking subject. This is not because voice-data is different to other forms of data. It is not. The problem is that it is often treated as though it were. Derrida used the term phonocentrism to describe the assumed 'absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning' (1976, p.11). As described in 4.6 above, the poststructurally imagined person is created and endlessly re-created within a web of discursively and materially structured power relations. Most of the time we fail to notice how the discursive and material furniture that surrounds us structures our life, shapes our body and determines what lies within and without our field of vision. As a result, the ways in which we walk, eat, dress, form relationships, spend our time, dream and hope tends to feel natural, normal, 'just the way it is'. What's more, the discourses and material structures that create us as subjects change over time and in different contexts. This thinking undermines the notion of an 'I' capable of presenting itself as consistent, coherent and whole. Recalling and retelling the past becomes a very tricky endeavor since:

> the subject of the speech-act can never be the same as the one who acted yesterday: the I of the discourse can no longer be the site where a previously stored-up person is innocently restored." (Barthes, 1989, p. 17)

This is especially challenging when the subject of the speech-act – me, other former pupils, teachers or parents in the case of this project – is removed from the 'self' on whose behalf it speaks by 20 or 30 years.

This is not to suggest that voice-based data should be abandoned. One cannot study the social world and ignore. It does, however, preclude the presentation of voice data that 'speaks for itself' separated from the cultural,

political, spatial and temporal contexts in which it is produced. MacLure suggests that we'd do well to pay attention to other features of voice, such as:

> 'laughter, mimicry, mockery, silence, stuttering, tears, slyness, shouts, jokes, lies, irrelevance, partiality, inconsistency, self-doubt, masks, false starts, false 'fronts' and faulty memories – not as impediments or lapses to be corrected, mastered, read 'through' or written off, but as perplexing resources for the achievement of a dissembling, 'authentic' voice. (MacLure, 2009, p. 98)

The poststructurally inclined social researcher will have to make decisions about how they treat the many subjects involved in the making of their research project. Those of us who opt to maintain a sense of coherent personhood will have to find a theoretically consistent way to do so.

### 4.14 Poststructural memory and the past

Recollections of previous experiences are not fixed forms of knowledge accessible via the medium of memory: they are 'always already interpretations, and interpretations of interpretations that [we] have long forgotten and/or reinterpreted (St. Pierre 2001, p.142). The quality of our memories - whether they are vivid or faint, what we remember and what we don't, what seems to matter and what seems irrelevant, what it all means to us - is subject to change and influenced by what came before and after the memories of the event of which we speak. The 'I' who writes, right now, has within her the traces of the many 'mes' who existed before this point – working class school girl, unsuccessful heterosexual, contrary teenager, Oxford undergraduate, care worker, newly qualified social worker - whether I am able to recall them or not. What comes 'after' inevitably colonises what came 'before':

> [m]emory can never rescue the past through reflexivity, since there is no past *in itself* to be rescued. (Santos 2001, p.170, my emphasis)

The same is true of old snapshots and of images of artefacts from the past. Poststructural thinking prevents me from presenting them as direct evidence of what happened since our relationship with them materially alters through time and space. Neither you, Reader, nor I can view my brother's school reports, for example, except through a lens that incorporates the knowledge that he made it to university eventually and one tinted with a sense of nostalgia as we remember (if we are old enough) the days when people wrote reports on paper with pens using language that is sometimes out of step with today's pedagogical norms. Poststructuralism is concerned with the complex contexts in which events play out and subjects and things are produced: time, place, smells, walks, hair styles, glances, furniture, music, concrete, shoes, fights, laughter – every 'thing' involved in bringing us to the place where we now stand. Every 'thing' which is now absent. 'What happened' always exceeds the written and visual representations contained in a thesis or any written or spoken account. The poststructurally inclined researcher will want to find creative ways to conjure up the past whilst simultaneously drawing the attention of the tricks of the light used to render the intangible tangible.

### 4.15 Poststructural empathy

As a poststructurally inclined social researcher I cannot claim that my research 'gives voice' to my participants or to marginalized groups in general. The poststructurally inclined researcher is concerned with positioning and power which requires them to acknowledge and address their privileged position as writer. I must pay attention to the interests served and marginalized by the choices I make, the alternative truths silenced or drowned out in the representation of voices within my texts.

> Who decides what 'exact words' should be used in the accounts? Who was listened to, and how were they listened to? How might voices be distorted and fictionalized in the process of reinscription? And indeed, how are those voices *necessarily* distorted and fictionalized in the process of reinscription? (Jackson and Mazzei, 2009, p. 2)

The very notion of empathy becomes troublesome when one takes an approach that elevates context, relationality and contingency over categorisation based on imagined pre-existing commonalities. This is not to deny the possibility of connections based on shared points of reference, experience and interpretation between researcher, research contributor and reader but it does encourage us to be vigilant and resist the kind of over-identification that can make us blind to differences that come to matter:

> [T]here's always a space in the middle, even when there is touching. [.....] Bodies make each other a little more possible: but they can't do everything. My sight can't give you your sight, my performative blindness may not even be empathy, and my mix of ability and impairment doesn't impinge much on yours. What we do have together, in the middle of this thing, is a brush with solidarity, and that's real. (Berlant, 2011, p. 266)

### 4.16 Poststructural autoethnography

The challenges outlined above apply equally to data generated by the researcher's own speech. Ellis, Adams and Bochner, academics well known for their work in this field, describe autoethnography as:

> an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*). (2011, s.1)

What kind of autoethnography makes sense within a theoretical framework that troubles the very notion of a consistent, coherent 'I' capable of speaking for itself? How might I use my past experience to shed a light on certain aspects of social reality if there is no experience that sits apart from the discourses, processes of subjectification and power relations in which we all exist? I can no longer think or talk about my transition from working class, Geordie comprehensive school girl to Oxford undergraduate, for example, except through a lens tinted by my subsequent exposure to social theories

and a sense of self that incorporates subjectivities that had no meaning for me at the time (e.g. being gay/queer, middle-class-ish and academically well qualified). Jackson and Mazzei urge the poststructurally informed autoethnographer to:

> interrogate previous experiences (as already interpreted events) for how their meanings are bound to discourse and power and therefore may limit their interpretations and analyses (2008, p.304)

That I can attempt. But I must also acknowledge the trickiness of differentiating the 'autoethnographic' and 'other-people-focused' components of this thesis. It might be more honest, more ethical, to describe this entire project as 'autoethnographic', since every word attributed to another person is there because I selected it in preference to words that were also spoken but which you, Reader, will never read. Alternatively, one might abandon the word 'autoethnographic' because it is superfluous given the inevitable constant presence of the researcher in any research project, even when textual techniques are used to hide them.

### 4.17 Challenging the generalisability / specificity binary

Qualitative research designs should deliver rich and contextual findings that produce insights and questions that can then be tested using a quantitative methodology capable of producing generalisable findings. This assumption framed my first postgraduate research methods training at Oxford University in the mid 90s. The poststructural conceptualization of people as the highly contextualised products of broad discursive and material structures undermines the general/specific and global/local binaries that underpin that assumption. Our worldviews and sense of identity emerges from the frameworks of meaning into which we are born, interpret the world, contribute, perform and resist. For example, in my 20s I was able to adopt a gay identity because the concept of 'gay' was embedded in the discourses regarding human sexuality that were dominant at the time in the cultural setting in which I grew up. The concepts of 'gender-fluid', 'non-binary' and

'queer' as in counter-normative did not so were not available to me as potential subject positions.

Personal recollections regarding educational trajectories that incorporated 'one of the worst schools in Britain' and universities, top firsts and postgraduate qualifications are rooted in subject-producing discourses relating to the purpose of schooling, social class, dis/advantage, intelligence, hard work, capability, aspirations, good jobs and social inequalities. And so, to study the conditions of possibility relevant to the highly contextualized educational trajectories of myself and my research contributors is also to study power relations and discourses that extend beyond our own sense of personal experience.

### 4.18 Poststructural reflexivity

Dowling describes reflexivity as the 'researcher's engagement of continuous examination and explanation of how they have influenced a research project' (2008, p.747). From a poststructural perspective there is no Gods-eye view, no theory-free place, no neutral ground from which the researcher is able to scrutinise herself. I can only ever think and act within the framework of linguistically and materially produced meaning in which I am located. The 'I' who presents herself here as the reflexive researcher is no less contextually bound, no less constructed, than all the other 'I's, 'theys', 'yous' and 'wes' I present to you throughout the thesis. Admittedly, this is not an exclusively poststructural concern. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, for example, grappled with this very issue in *Sketch for Self-Analysis* (2008) and *An invitation to reflexive sociology*, written with his writing partner Loic Wacquant (1992). The absence of a place outside the researcher presents an insurmountable problem for Bourdieu in that:

> one cannot talk about [the research] object without exposing oneself to a permanent mirror effect: every word that can be uttered about scientific practice can be turned back on the person who utters it'. (Bourdieu 2004, p.4)

For Bourdieu, as for the poststructurally inclined, we must acknowledge and wrestle with the endlessly deferred nature of our reflexive observations as we look upon ourselves in relation to our methodology, looking upon ourselves in relation to our methodology, looking upon ourselves…. ad infinitum.

A more specifically poststructural challenge to the notion of reflexivity comes from the idea that reality is produced through the inextricable entanglement of meaning and material. On this subject I am influenced by the writings of Karen Barad (2007). Using Bohrian quantum theory as her inspiration, Barad rejects the idea that 'things' have inherent boundaries. 'Existence is not an individual affair', she argues, because there is 'no independent, self-contained existence' in the world (2007, ix). From this perspective, the methodologies, researchers, research contributors and data that make up a research project cannot sensibly be said to exist independently of one another. Within this space, reflexivity does not so much require consideration of our actions *on* the research but rather:

> responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming, of which we are a part. Ethics is about mattering, about taking account of the entangled materializations of which we are part, including new configurations, new subjectivities, new possibilities. Even the smallest cuts matter. Responsibility, then, is a matter of the ability to respond. Listening for the response of the other and an obligation to be responsive to the other, who is not entirely separate from what we call the self. This way of thinking ontology, epistemology, and ethics together makes for a world that is always already an ethical matter. (Barad 2012, p.69)

### 4.19 Poststructural validity

'Validity' is a problematic concept for those of us who suspect all truth claims of masking particular interests. A traditional qualitative reframing of validity as 'authenticity', 'plausibility', 'credibility' or 'confirmability' (see Lub

2015; Koro-Ljungberg 2010) does not circumvent the challenges posed by poststructural thinking. What kind of ‘validity’ makes sense in a world without foundational truths? How might the ‘goodness’ or ‘soundness’ of a research text and the processes involved in its production (traditionally, ‘sampling’, ‘data gathering’, ‘analysis’ etc) be sensibly evaluated within a poststructural worldview that sees language as constitutive, rather than reflective, of social reality? What findings might we sensibly present from a position that embraces the uncertain, the unfixed, the fragmented, the contradictory? What might a valid doctoral thesis look like from this perspective? How to compile and structure a ‘literature review’ when one prefers boundary breaching configurations of text over categories and genres? How can we appeal to authoritative writers and thinkers to support our conclusions when neither they, nor the knowledge they produce, will stay still?

> [W]hen people say, "Well, you thought this a few years ago and now you say something else," my answer is ... [Laughs] "Well, do you think I have worked like that all those years to say the same thing and not to be changed?" This transformation of one's self by one's own knowledge is, I think, something rather close to the aesthetic experience. Why should a painter work if he is not transformed by his own painting? (Foucault 1991, p. 131)

The most experimentally inclined poststructural researchers might wish to throw the notion of validity away and start again. I think this is what Geoff Bright, Gill Whiteley and Walt Shaw did in performing their ‘Onto-epistemological hoodoo’ at the 5th Summer Institute in Qualitative Research at Manchester Metropolitan University. They described their work in the conference brochure as follows:

> This bespoke alchemy/schmalchemy manifestation will put a single page of Karen Barad’s Meeting the Universe Halfway to work as a visual score, mini cut-up libretto, and incantatory spell with which to initiate a sonic/visual/ live art improv assemblage of regular

> Schmalchemists Geoff Bright, Gill Whiteley and Walt Shaw and nine volunteer SIQR confederates. The performance will work respectfully, chaotically and ineptly with some of the tools, practices, and apparatus of Hoodoo Conjure (and with some transformational paraphenalia of our own). (Bright, Whiteley and Shaw, 2017)

I found the performance intriguing, thought-provoking, impenetrable, confusing, 'sensible', a good example of post-qualitative research. (This is not a term I have used to describe my own project which, in working with familiar research concepts 'sous rature' is not radical enough in terms of the departure I understand St. Pierre to have had in mind when she coined the term (2014).)

Other poststructurally inclined writer-thinkers have worked with the notion of validity sous rature (e.g. Lather 1993; Richardson 2000; Clough 2000). Lather, for example, has wrestled with this conundrum by imagining a number of alternative 'framings' of validity that take postfoundational theories into account (2007, pp.117–129). The frames include: 'ironic validity' (in which the text is presented not as a representation of a social reality but as a representation of its own failure to "represent what it points at but can never reach" (Hayles, 1990, p. 261 in Lather, 2007, p.121); 'paralogical validity' which 'fosters differences and lets contradictions remain in tension (p.122); 'rhizomatic validity' which 'subverts and unsettles from within' working against the 'constraints of authority, regularity, and commonsense' to open up thought (p. 124); and 'voluptuous validity' which brings together epistemology and ethics through a reflexivity that Lather sees as a feminist, or feminine. Her categories are complicated, difficult and, she admits, 'offered as more problem than solution' (p.127). Formulating poststructurally sensible quality criteria is easier said than done. But this is a doctoral thesis, the quality of which will be judged regardless of my theoretical positioning. And so I set out the criteria I have used to guide my work which you might wish to use to judge my work in chapter 6.

…….

So poststructural thinking presents challenges and questions to the social researcher who is able to hear them and wishes to respond. I set out myresponse in the form of a ‘methodology’ in chapter 6. But first, let’s return to the question of how I become poststructurally inclined before I encountered poststructural thought.

# Chapter 5

# A selection of musings on how I became poststructurally inclined before I'd ever heard of poststructuralism: continued

*If you're trapped in the dream of the other, you're fucked.*

Gilles Delueze quoted in Slavoj Žižek, Violence 2008

## 5.1 The purpose of this chapter

This chapter picks up where chapter 3 left off as I present a selection of musings about my childhood, adulthood in an attempt to grapple with Judith Butler's question:

> 'how is it that we become available to a transformation of who we are, a contestation of which compels us to rethink ourselves, a reconfiguration of our 'place' and our 'ground'?' (1995, p.131).

In doing so, I also present data about events that might have contributed to the conditions of possibility in which my own apparently surprising educational trajectory has played out.

## 5.2 On becoming a girl

*An awareness of the power of labels and names; a rejection of binaries; a realisation that the 'truths' pronounced by those in authority have a restrict the ways in which it is possible to be in the world.*

As a child, I liked to wear jeans, colourful t-shirts, sweatshirts and trainers, clothes generally displayed in the 'boys' section of shops even today. In primary school I owned a yellow and black jacket that made me look like Starsky from the US TV cop show Starsky and Hutch, in my own mind at least. Looking like a male cop felt good and made me swagger a little when I walked. I'm not sure if anyone ever noticed but no one ever told me if they did. I was occasionally mistaken as a boy by bus drivers:

> "Half into town, please, driver."
>
> "That'll be 10p, son".

I liked it until I reached the age of 11 when I began to occur to me that the boundaries of socially acceptable gender expression shrink as you get older. I wouldn't have thought about it in that way, of course: I just knew,

somehow, that once I got to the ‘big school’, I wouldn’t be able to be a tomboy without people laughing at me.

Around the same time, I started to develop a conscious awareness of the effects of gender assumptions. Enid Blyton’s negative depictions of poor people, black people and gypsies in her Famous Five series passed me by. But the binary gender specificity of the world she created irritated me, particularly in the form of the 10-year-old Ann, who cooked and cleaned for her brothers and needed their protection whenever she felt frightened. I preferred the character of George, a girl who was brave, wore trousers, insisted on doing everything the boys did and whose best friend was a dog.

I can recall several incidents in which I became aware of the negative effects of my female gender positioning. For example, during my first two years at Blakelaw, girls were forbidden to wear trousers, for no logical reason I could understand. At twelve, my woodwork teacher called me to the front of the class, told everyone to be quiet, held my work up and said: “This isn’t too bad, considering she’s a girl. Some of you lads should be ashamed of yourselves.” I did not take this as a compliment and gave up woodwork as a subject, a decision I regret from time to time. A year or so later, a group of us girls asked our PE teacher if we could play football instead of hockey. Newcastle is a footballing city and many of the girls had an interest in football. Our request was denied by a senior member of staff on the grounds that ‘girls’ bones are too soft’.

By the time I’d reached adolescence, the risks associated with being too boyish had intensified: people might think you were gay and call you a ‘lezza’, which could be dangerous, not just in Blakelaw but in any school at that time I would imagine. Did you know any out gay teenagers when you were in school? But you knew plenty straight ones, right? By the time I was 14, the teachers had ceased to enforce the school uniform policy, leaving the job to the pupils: a light blue shirt, navy skirt and sensible shoes were no longer acceptable. If I’d been born 10 years later I would have had the option to dress in baggy jeans, hoodies and chunky flat shoes. But I went to school

in the 80s: it was all about the big hair, blue eyeshadow and shiny, shoulder-padded blouses. I didn't want to look exactly like the other girls. This was, in part, a reflection of my snobbish attitude towards 'crowd followers' and partly because I knew I wouldn't look quite right if I tried to follow the crowd. Sadly, I didn't have the flare, confidence or resources to develop a workable style template of my own. There were a few 'alternative' kids in my school, mainly goths and heavy metal fans. Their musical, fashion and social preferences were integrated and expressed collectively every weekend in a green square in the city centre. I admired them but I had no interest in joining a tribe. I experimented with other looks – 'hippy', 'alternative', 'studenty'. None of them really worked. Most days I went for a slightly less 'girlie' version of the style adopted by my friends. I must have looked sufficiently normal to pass as someone sufficiently normal. I endured the odd comment about my shoes (I have never worn a high heel in my life) but no one accused me of being a lezza. Maybe if they had I'd have reached the conclusion that I was gay earlier than I did (at the age of 25) rather than thinking I was just awkward and unattractive to the opposite sex.

I was never interested in boys of my own age. All my crushes were on 'others' – teachers (both female and male), the Sikh young man whose dad owned the corner shop, a boarding school educated boy from my church. If the category of queer had been available to me as a young person I might have embraced that, kept my options open, woven my sexual identity into my sense of being a bit 'counter'. The category of 'trans' was not available to me at that time either. Who knows whether I would have applied it to myself if it had. I don't recall ever feeling that I was in the wrong body, that I was really a boy. I just remember thinking that the idea that girls and boys should wear different clothes and do different things on account of having different genitals was really stupid.

## 5.3 Family Matters

*Living the deconstruction of the dis/advantaged binary; tales of the productive and restrictive power of institutions; awareness of the material consequences of poverty; self in relation to a broad family canvass*

My childhood was framed by a consistent combination of privilege and disadvantage, the typical and the remarkable, the comfortable and the stressful. Both my parents had backgrounds touched by poverty and family breakdown. My mam's parents split up when she was two. Her maternal grandparents split up after her grandmother gave birth to twins that her husband did not believe were his (he'd been a prisoner of war in Germany until 6 months before they were born so he had a point). She managed without him for a while but, fearful of a workhouse existence, she eventually sent one of them (my nana's sister) to a 1500 bed Barnardo's girls home in the South of England. The admission documents Barnardo's sent me cited poverty and overcrowding as the reasons. She lived there between the ages of 3 and 14. My great-grandmother tried to get her daughter back twice but her applications were refused on the grounds that it would be unsettling for the child. When the child became an adult (i.e. 14 in those days) she was sent back to her family in Newcastle. My mam tells me her auntie was great fun but struggled with depression. She was eventually diagnosed with bipolar mood disorder and had electroconvulsive therapy as a psychiatric inpatient. She married for the first time in her 50s and the relationship lasted until her husband died some 30 years later.

My dad's mother left the family home when he and his brother where both under 10, taking his older sister with her. A second sister had already died, aged 14, from complications associated with diabetes. My grandfather, who would have been in his 60s at the time and in poor health, sent the boys to the Gordon's School, a military style children's home in Surrey. A newspaper clipping from 1945, which I came across at my parent's home after my dad died, states:

*Every institution is to be judged by its results. More than 5000 boys have been taken from the ditches of degradation, and after training have been placed in vocations, thereby becoming good citizens.*

*Figure 7: My dad aged 15 meeting Viscount Montgomery, c.1945, permission to reproduce granted by The Gordonians*

On the rare occasions my dad spoke of his time there he did so fondly. I think it gave him a sense of order, belonging and pride in his appearance and conduct. Though I have also wondered whether autistic spectrum traits (not an official diagnosis but my own) might also have been a significant factor on that score.

*Figure 8: Great-granny Euphemia with bus conductor friends Hashmi, Nana Winnie and Great-Auntie Irene, Newcastle circa 1954, family snapshot.*

Both my parents left school without qualifications. They started a relationship after my dad, who was the manager of an industrial paints warehouse, recruited my mam as his secretary. She was 21and lived at home. He was 35, had four children and was separated from his wife. My dad's brother and sister also divorced. Against this backdrop, my brother and I were in the unusual position of having parents who remained married throughout our childhood. I lived in the same three-bedroomed maisonette between the age

of 6 and 19 when I left for university. The end of my dad's paid employment through ill-health coincided with his no longer having financial responsibility for his older children so our household income remained more or less the same. Some things were challenging. My dad had painful rheumatoid arthritis and Type 1 diabetes like his late sister. The effects of these conditions were a source of worry and constraint during my childhood. I felt different to my family in terms of my interests, concerns and worldview. But I also felt loved and secure, taking the stability of my parent's marriage and our modest but steady economic position for granted.

In addition to stories of poverty and family breakdown, I also inherited tales of relatives who were unusual, talented and/or successful. According to family legend, my great-great-great-grandfather invented the technique for smoking kippers that is widely used today. There is no proof of this because, so the story goes, an unscrupulous rival stole his idea and profited from it. Census data does list his profession as a fishmonger so you never know. Then there's James Renforth of Gateshead, a world-famous sculler who was a cousin of my great-great grandmother's.

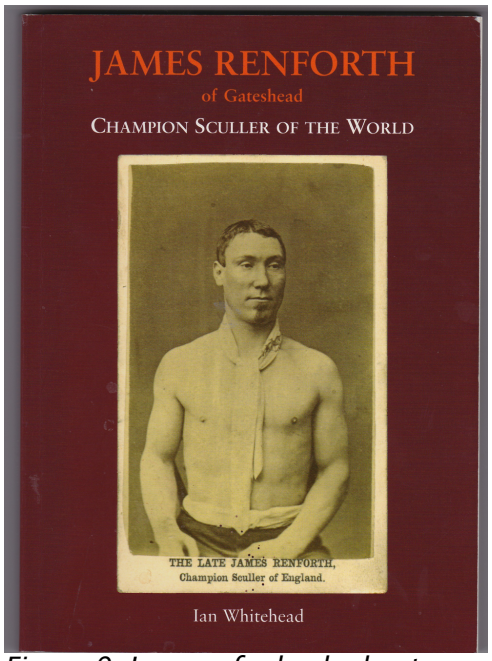


*Figure 9: Image of a book about an ancestor owned by my mam.*

My nana's cousin, Eddie Tripp, who played double bass, is credited as a musician on a number of recordings with famous artists including Stéphane Grappelli, Yehudi Menuhin and Shirley Bassey[2]. Carrying on the creative theme, my dad's sister Marion performed her own songs with an accordion on a local radio station in Carlisle, which as a child impressed me as much as Eddie Tripp's career. Then there was my dad's brother Dennis, who had been a frequent runaway from the military boys' home. Dennis and I clashed when I was a teenager: he was a self-made man who idolised Margaret Thatcher and I had a subscription to Marxism Today. He and his second wife Norma made a lot of money in a variety of ways. They lived in the most exclusive areas of Newcastle and owned expensive cars with personalised number plates.

*Figure 10: Eddie Tripp with double bass and fellow band members, family snapshot.*

Finally, my mam's first cousin is Anne McElvoy, an Oxford graduate who became a national newspaper editor, a presenter and contributor on several BBC Radio 3 and Radio 4 programmes and an occasional panellist on BBC Question Time. I've never met her but I was aware of her existence as a teenager. Anne has no regional accent, despite the fact that her dad and my mam's dad were brothers and she was brought up in the North East. She has three children called Benjamin, Gabriel and Isolde. You can't get more middle class than that, can you?

[2] For example, see: http://www.arkivmusic.com/classical/album.jsp?album_id=94372

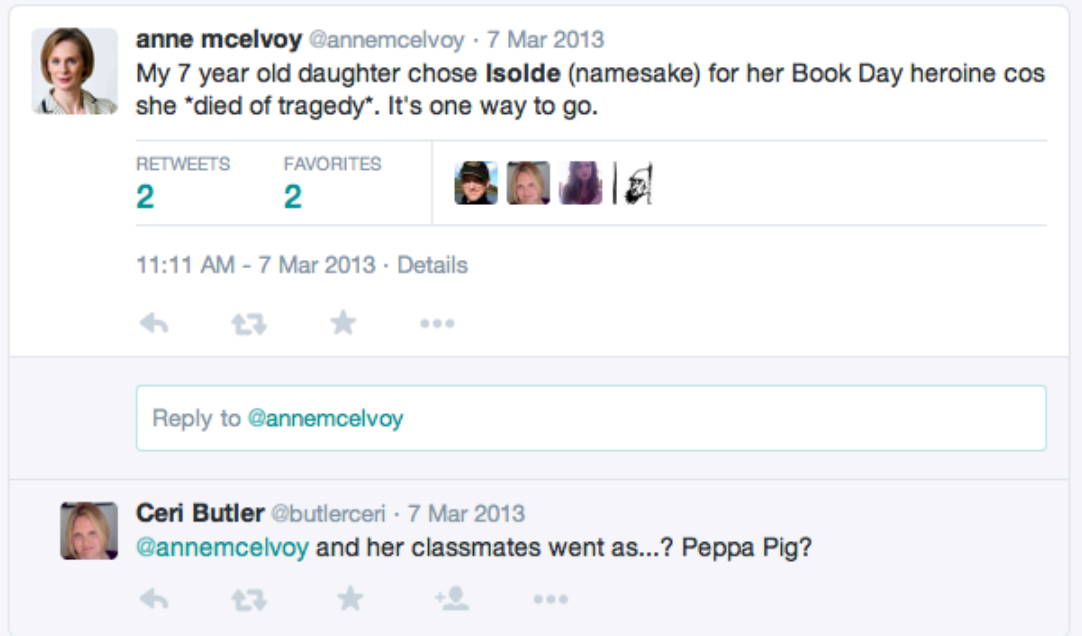



*Figure 11: A tweet from Cousin Anne McElvoy's Twitter Account*

## 5.4 Others and Edgelands

*Becoming a tribeless hybrid, embracing uncertainty, a sense of power, positioning and subjectification, an attunement to difference*

As a teenager, I knew I was 'different'. My difference manifested in a variety of ways including my tastes, interests and preoccupations but it can't have been that obvious to the casual observer: I had friends, I wasn't bullied, I generally got on well with people. My belief that I was different produced self-respect and resilience in that I saw myself, pompously at times I'm sure, as more independent, more freethinking, more interesting than those who accepted social norms uncritically. Not that I would have been familiar with the terms 'social norm' or 'critical thinking' at the time. My belief that I was different also caused pain, particularly in relation to my feelings of inadequacy as a young woman. Reflecting on it as a 49 year old, I suspect this sense of 'dis-ease' came from many sources: TV and magazine

presentations of young women wearing particular kinds of clothes, hair and make-up, none of which appealed to me; friends' perspectives on boys and male pop stars as the objects of lust/love, which I did not share; regular exposure to negative representations of gay people (my nana read The Sun, my parents The News of the World).

My interest in religious and philosophical ideas and involvement in a church was another marker of difference. My family weren't church goers but when I was 8 a member of a local non-conformist Christian congregation knocked on our door and asked my mam if she could take me and my brother to Sunday school. My mam said be my guest! I attended regularly until I left for Oxford at 19. Church provided a source of encounters that I wouldn't have otherwise had. I made friends with teenagers who went to private school and with old people, I sang in the choir and went on two exchange trips to Germany. I felt accepted at church. Which is not to say that I belonged. I never felt entirely 'in it' or 'of it'. Social class was a factor but so was the nature and expression of my faith. Whist I loved the story of the mysterious rebel Jesus, I never got to grips with the key components of Christian doctrine: how the Trinity works, what 'dying for our sins' means, how you can square suffering with the notion of a god that is all-knowing, all-powerful and infinitely merciful. I was less interested in the afterlife than I was the 'meaning of life'. In contrast to both my Christian and atheist friends who had found their answers, I was (/am) a perpetual quester. This pre-occupation extended beyond Christianity to other religions and systems of thought. Had Oxford not materialised, I would have taken a place at Manchester University to do a degree in comparative religion.

As you can no doubt imagine, my sense of difference was magnified during my Oxford undergraduate years - socially, culturally, academically and materially. Whilst I'd had the experience of being financially poorer than my friends at church, the implications of coming from a lower income household carried more weight in this context. For example, during the long 'vacations', I worked as a cleaner at Newcastle General Hospital whilst my

friends went travelling or worked as interns or attended a Hebrew summer school in Jerusalem which surely must have had an impact on our respective academic performances. Perhaps if I'd had a stronger sense of commonality with others 'like me', I'd have become involved in student politics. Instead, I looked inwardly, focussing on my bodily 'out-of-syncness': my voice - too quiet, too accented, too lacking key vocabulary; my walk - too unwomanly, too timid; my clothes – not 'studenty' enough; my hair - unstylish; and my brain, which struggled to read and process things quickly enough, both academically and socially. I made some strong and lasting friendships at Oxford, but I remained tribeless, suspicious of people who had what I perceived as a very clearly defined social identity be that the wilfully posh, the desperately cool, or the unoriginally 'eccentric'.

During the years following my undergraduate experience I began to develop a conscious appreciation of the power of positioning, labelling and categorisation. This might have been facilitated by my exposure to people from a broad range of backgrounds and circumstances. After Oxford, I worked as an unqualified residential care worker with learning disabled people alongside working-class colleagues with backgrounds similar to my own but without the Oxford degree. I loved the residents of the care home and maintained friendships with some after I left. My flatmates at the time were from privileged backgrounds, economically at least. After three years, I started training as a social worker and did an MSc in Applied Social Studies. This introduced me to academic sociology and the 'social model of disability' which identifies systemic barriers such as negative attitudes and town planning practices that serve to exclude people from society, effectively disabling them. I did placements in the criminal justice service and at Broadmoor Hospital, a high security forensic psychiatric institution, and worked as a personal assistant, a P.A. for two disabled rights activists to supplement my small grant. These experiences nurtured a sensitivity to the power of labelling and categorisation on the options open to people who lived 'under' them and the wildly differing consequences of resistance between, for example, a respected, disabled equality campaigner and a

Broadmoor Hospital patient. I was also conscious of my own positioning in relation to the people I worked with which would shift significantly over the course of a week: as a student social worker I'd lock people up using keys I carried around on a large metal ring chained to my belt and visible at all times. As a PA I'd sit on my own in the kitchen, waiting to be called to give assistance, obeying instructions not to make conversation with guests to the house.

Perhaps my long-established sense of difference in conjunction with my ability to make meaningful relationships with different 'types' of people explains, to some extent as least, why I have never felt at home in communities rooted in shared identity, e.g. those focused around class, sexual orientation, political affiliation, religion or gender.

### 5.5 And so?

And so, I emerged – am still emerging – as someone who feels most at home in the edgelands, someone suspicious of those who cry 'this is the truth!' from the centre, someone who is happiest when her path crosses with another Other. My past explains, perhaps, why I am drawn, not only to poststructural concepts, but to the concept builders themselves. Or at least to the versions of them I construct through my reading. Derrida, Foucault, Butler, Barthes, Cixous, Barad, Lather, St. Pierre, Richardson. Women, Jews, queers, first generation academics: all margin surfers and inhabitants of the edgelands of one kind or another.

I wasn't a conventionally rebellious child, or adult for that matter. I've engaged with the institutions I've come into contact with. But I see their working parts, the systems, procedures and assumptions that are strange and arbitrary but present themselves as neutral or common-sense. I like to point them out to anyone willing (or not) to listen. When I arrived at Oxford to read theology there were some glaring deficits in my academic ability – I was a slow reader, a bad speller, I didn't know how to structure an essay or reference my work. That much is obvious in the handwritten essays I

produced during my first year and have held onto. But I was always good at looking at things from different angles: I'd worked out that there is no such as a God's-eye view before I'd stopped going to church. And so by the time I encountered Foucault's writings on the subject, Derrida's on deconstruction and Butlers on performativity I was more than ready to view myself, my past and the world afresh through a poststructural lens.

## 5.6 That philosophy in which we feel freest

'One seeks a picture of the world', Nietzsche tells us, 'in *that* philosophy in which we feel freest; i.e. in which our most powerful drive feels free to function' (1968, p.224).

These are my most consistently powerful drives:

1) To connect: with people, other living beings, things, places and ideas.
2) To make a positive contribution to the world, so that it is better, on balance, that I lived than never existed.
3) To resist becoming trapped; to escape; to avoid being hemmed in; to become unstuck; to throw off my 'mind forg'd manacles'[3].

As you will have gathered by now, Reader, this PhD is personal. All PhDs are personal, of course, but not all are as overtly personal as this one. Most doctoral students identify a 'gap' in a seemingly discrete slice of the academic literature. They aim to generate knowledge to fill this gap which will make a useful contribution, both inside and outside the academy. For example, in addition to hoping that their writing will be cited by other academics, they might also want to produce knowledge which is useful to policy makers or knowledge that supports the interests of groups and communities who suffer the effects of social injustice. I often wish I'd taken this approach. But I didn't. My starting point was not a gap in the literature so much as a gap in me, a nagging cavity, an ever-present sense of absence that forces me to notice certain things and see them as strange or

[3] 'Mind forg'd manacles' is a phrase coined by William Blake in his poem London (Blake 1794/1992)

unsettling, funny or unfair. My gap is amorphous. I'm not even sure where it comes from but I suspect it has something to do with my not being straight, not being a man, not being young anymore but not yet being old, not having children, not being entirely working class or middle class, not having a 'neuro-typical' brain, not having a faith (in God or the non-existence of God), not having a career or a profession, not being mentally ill but not being entirely mentally stable, not being comfortably off, not struggling to make ends meet, not having a sense of what I am going to be or where I am going to end up.

It seems to me that it's the rubbing against one another of absences and presences, the things I can see and the things that lurk just outside my field of vision, that produce my most powerful drives. I have chosen to work within a broadly poststructural theoretical framework, I think, because the constellation of ideas that fall within it paint a picture of the world in which my drives feel free to function. My drives, when acted out, are not always compatible, of course. The desire to connect can pull in the opposite direction to the desire to escape, for example. Within the context of my research, poststructuralism requires me to acknowledge this tension and the affects it might have on the project, but not to resolve it.

And so for a range of complex, mysterious and not so mysterious reasons I have an affinity with certain thinkers, writers, researchers and concept builders, living and dead. I am able to locate myself and glimpse interesting futures within their theories. I see them as intellectual travelling companions. Or maybe they are maps. Or compasses? Or the terrain on which I walk. Or the vistas I gaze at along the way. All of the above, probably.

I hope this project will facilitate the functioning of my most powerful drives in such a way that produces a thesis that does something interesting. A thesis that might cause writer and reader to see aspects of the world and themselves as unfamiliar or unexpected which might, in turn, open a small space in which it is possible to be-do-live something different.

# Chapter 6

# Methodology

*Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.*

Samuel Becket, Worstwood Ho, 1983

## 6.1 Purpose of this chapter

I am writing this chapter late in the day. It is as much a reflection of my attempts to make sense of my experience of doctoral thesis production as it is a description of the methodological strategy that has shaped and driven my research. I hope this chapter will convince you that my methodology and the techniques I've employed to bring it to life constitute a research strategy that is both sensible in relation to its poststructural positioning and potentially fruitful given my ambitions for the project which I remind you of in section 6.2. I present my over-arching methodological driver - 'thinking with theory' – in 6.3. I describe my methods of data construction, analysis and textual representation and consider some ethical implications in sections 6.4. to 6.10. Finally, in 6.11 I present the quality criteria which I have used to guide my work.

By the time you get to the end of the chapter, I hope you will have a sense of what I am attempting to do and why and an appreciation of why I conceptualise my doctoral project as an intra-active assemblage of theories, techniques, bodies, technologies, places and materials that produce what look like separate things – research questions, a methodology, methods, data and a text – but which have only ever existed within the mix. When read in conjunction with chapter 4, which sets out some key poststructural ideas and their implications for social research, this chapter should enable you to see how my thesis as a whole, including the chapters you have already read, are an attempt to enact my methodology.

## 6.2 Project ambitions

You might recall from section 1.3 that I have four inter-related ambitions for this project:

i. To explore the differences that came to matter in the surprising educational trajectories of my contributors and myself in such a way that resists a meritocratic narrative that associates formal

educational achievement with essential personal characteristics such as intelligence, diligence and determination.

ii. To respond honestly to the implications of poststructural theory.

iii. To produce a thesis capable of engaging readers interested in its social subject matter – apparently surprising educational trajectories - regardless of their familiarity with poststructural thinking.

Having developed a degree of fluency in this mode of thinking, I am now able to engage with more adventurous, experimental and therefore difficult forms of writing, concept building and performance (e.g. see Bright et al (2017), Holmes and Jones (2013) and MacLure (2017)). But my research diaries remind me that my initial response to this sort of 'progressive' work was one of frustration associated with feelings of inadequacy and exclusion. The writers I have cited above have worked experimentally in locations within the academy that claim a familiarity with poststructural ideas. Within this context their efforts are exciting, creative, galvanising and ethical. My thesis has been produced in a different context. It incorporates material shared by other people. Representations of them and their memories form a significant part of this text. If my writing is not intelligible, I will make it impossible for them to respond to, help shape and resist my representations of them as subjects.

iv. That this project will facilitate the functioning of my most powerful drives producing a thesis with the capacity to do something interesting and useful in the process

These ambitions have both arisen out of and driven my thinking about the apparently unexpected educational trajectories of former Blakelaw pupils

through a poststructural lens. For example, my antipathy towards meritocratic explanations of the unexpected educational 'success' of the 'socially lowly' is rooted in my educational biography and scepticism towards the knowledge claims of the powerfully positioned that pre-date my time as a doctoral student *and* my exposure to widening participation literature and poststructural theory after I enrolled on the doctoral programme.

### 6.3 Thinking with theory - a methodology

My main methodological driver is 'thinking with theory', a method/ology underpinned by poststructural ideas and assumptions. Thinking with theory involves the reading of data (as 'processes constructed by the researcher's interpretive practices' (Denzin, 2013, p. 355)) through a variety of theoretical lenses. The purpose of this exercise is not to pin down 'what really happened' or what it 'really meant' but to produce knowledge that opens up thinking about an aspect of social life so that we might come to see what has happened, what is happening, and what is yet to happen in new ways. I have been guided by the work of Mazzei and Jackson (2012), who developed and applied a thinking with theory methodology to the analysis of 'traditional' data in the form of interview transcripts, and Amatucci (2009) whose study of tangled teacher subjectivities 'plugs in' poetry, performative ethnography, narrative and what she calles 'senses of home and heart' to a range of poststructural theories to produce an autoethnographic layered account.

I have applied a thinking with theory methodology in two ways. Firstly, by using three specific theories, or clusters of theory, to think about and generate data in order to produce tentative and partial interpretations of the differences that came to matter in relation to the surprising educational journeys of my contributors and I. They are: Bourdieu's thinking tools - capital, field and habitus (chapters 8 and 9); Barad's concept of intra-action (chapters 10 and 11); and Foucault's notion of the subject (chapters 12 and 13). For each theorist I have constructed a specific research question by thinking about my data through that particular theoretical lens (an idea I

took from Mazzei and Jackson (2012). I present no 'raw data' in this thesis, i.e. data that is yet to be interpreted. The data presented in the Bourdieu, Barad and Foucault chapters is there because it lends itself to a, Baradian or Bourdieusian analysis and so, in a sense, is always already a Bourdieusian, Baradian or Foucauldian analysis. The research questions I've constructed for these chapters have both guided my selection and analysis of materials I'd already gathered *and* prompted me to make new data, in the form of conversations or written accounts of newly dredged memories. This is a 'doubled process': thinking with theory prompts new memories and the recognition of new artefacts whilst, at the same time, memories and artefacts animate theory, drawing me towards some concepts in preference to others. Analysis, then, happens at both the material gathering and textual representation stages. I address my decision to use the work of thinkers not generally categorized as poststructural - Barad, perhaps, Bourdieu, certainly – in chapter 7.

Secondly, I have applied my thinking with theory methodology to the production of this thesis as a whole. The choices I have made in its structuring, style and content have been heavily influenced by the poststructural ideas and assumptions presented in chapter 4 and the 'thinking with theory' chapters, 8, 10 and 12. There is no 'hard' distinction between 'project set up' (background, research question, methodology, ethics etc) and 'findings' chapters.

A thinking with theory methodology offers a number of affordances given my ambitions. Thinking about past events through a number of different theoretical lenses will likely produce a variety of interpretations allowing us both, writer and reader, to 'explore and mobilize' indeterminacies (Stronach *et al.*, 2006, p. 185) rather than contain them. This reflects and respects the poststructuralist embrace of the uncertain, the contradictory and the partial. A thinking with theory methodology enables me to work with a variety of data in a way that reflects poststructural perspectives on language, the subject and voice. Through its lens, all data, including that constructed

through voice capturing practices, are understood to be inextricably linked to the discursive and material contexts in which they are (re)produced. I am also interested in the potential of a thinking with theory methodology to facilitate what Walter Benjamin termed the 'fight for the oppressed past' (Thesis XVII, 1930/1999, p. 254). Echoing Benjamin, the cultural commentator Judith Halberstam posits that:

> dominant history teems with the remnants of alternative possibilities, and the job of the subversive intellectual is to trace the lines of the worlds they conjured and left behind. (2011, p.19)

A thinking with theory methodology has the capacity to help me do just that as I squeeze accounts of the past, in various forms, through 'thought machines' that warp them out of shape, bringing different differences into focus in the process.

## 6.4 Techniques that bring the methodology to life

I have used a range of inter-connected data making/analysis and textual representation techniques in order to enact and realise the potential of my thinking with theory methodology. These include: the construction and gathering of a wide range of materials which I have appointed as data; working with traditional research terminology 'sous rature'; the production of a layered text; and writing as a method of inquiry.

## 6.5 Data construction #1: project contributors and their contributions

Eight people made significant contributions to this project by sharing their time, memories, perceptions and artefacts. These include: 4 former Blakelaw pupils who went on to university, one of whom is my brother, another an old friend and two of whom I'd never met before; two mothers of these former pupils, one of whom is my own; a former teacher; and the chaplain who admitted me into Oxford. I engaged in conversations via email and in person (ranging between 1 hour and 2.5 hours) with all four pupils, my own mother and the chaplain. I engaged in face-to-face conversation with the other

mother while Sara was present (1 hour) and email conversations with the former teacher (8 emails over a period of 18 months or so). A fifth pupil contributed some memories and opinions via email but we did not meet. I do not refer to him in the thesis again but what he said in his emails did have some influence on my thinking at an early stage in the project.

From the relatively small amount of people who went on from Blakelaw School to university in the 80s and 90s those I recruited had a range of perceptions and experiences relating to: when they attended the Blakelaw; their level of academic achievement at school; their views on the strengths and weaknesses of the school and its impact on their educational journey; whether they went to university at 18/19 or some years later; the type of university they went to; the qualifications they gained or are currently working towards. This has enabled me to explore their journeys within the context of a changing higher educational landscape (e.g. in relation to fees, grants, access, place numbers) and to explore a range of subjectivities including academically 'successful' and 'unsuccessful' pupils. This might give the impression that I adopted a criterion sampling strategy, a form of purposive sampling involving the selection of cases to meet predetermined criterion (see Palys 2008). However, the spread of experience amongst my contributors was as much a matter of luck as judgement, something I realised I'd 'achieved' after the four had signed up to the project, prompting my decision to stop there. The involvement of the mother of one of my contributors in the 'Save our School' campaign of the 1990s, and her willingness to participate in the project was also serendipitous.

I audio recorded all pre-planned face-to-face conversations apart from the one with the Marxist chaplain (I explain why in chapter 15). This enabled me to listen to them many times whilst holding different theories in my mind. I transcribed sections that animated or 'spoke to' these theories. In addition to conversations held specifically for the purposes of this project, I gained permission from the teacher and my friend to use excerpts from email conversations about Blakelaw that preceded their involvement in the project.

I also had a number of unrecorded, impromptu conversations with my brother and mother, impressions of which I later wrote down from memory. I have represented the eight contributors through descriptions, words attributed to them, my theoretically driven reflections on their educational journeys and, in some cases, images of photographs and artefacts. I have also contributed recollections, opinions and artefacts relating to my own educational journey which I have used in the production of autoethnographic text.

The interview and email excerpts included in the Bourdieu, Barad and Foucault chapters are verbatim except where I have edited them to protect the anonymity of those not involved directly in this project. This is not because I want the data to 'speak for itself' but because my contributors told more engaging, more evocative, more theoretically rich tales than the ones I created on the back of their contributions. I considered writing in a Geordie accent because my contributors have beautiful ways of speaking that bring their stories to life. But the result was distracting, even for someone like me who is a fluent speaker, listener and reader of Geordie. If you are familiar with the Geordie accent then maybe you can read their words in the accent and see how you get on?

My contributors have played an invaluable role in this project. They are custodians of memories of the past with the potential to unsettle and reinforce dominant versions of a history of a 'failed school' and 'brightest and best' explanations of unexpected academic success. Like everyone else, my contributors and I are complex people who:

> remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others. Complex personhood means that people suffer graciously and selfishly too, get stuck in the symptoms of their troubles, and also transform themselves. (Gordon 2008, p.4)

I view the data generated through conversations with my contributors and autoethnographic reflection not as verifiable evidence but as embodied

interpretations that reflect, contextualize, resist, contribute to and complicate dominant discourses and versions of events.

## 6.6 Data construction #2: the gathering of pre-existing materials

I gathered a range of pre-existing materials, which I have appointed as data at various points in the thesis. You could compare this process to Marcel Duchamp's notion of a 'readymade' (MoMa, 2018) which involved the selection, repositioning, joining or tilting of readily available pre-manufactured objects to create something new, a work of art in his case, data/analysis in mine. The pre-manufactured objects I collected include: 20 national and local media articles relating to the Government's 'naming and shaming' of Blakelaw as a 'poorly performing school' in 1997 and its subsequent 'Fresh Start' in 1999; archived schools performance data covering 1994 – 2002; the Hansard record of ministerial statements, parliamentary questions and debate transcripts relating to Blakelaw and its 'fresh start' incarnation, Firfield; a 1996 Ofsted report; a 1974 report by HM Inspectors; and 'Making the Grade', a 6 part documentary about Blakelaw's 'fresh start' which aired by Channel Four in Nov / Dec 1999. I found these materials by searching online newspaper archives, the Department for Education online archives, the National Archives, Newcastle City Council online archives and Hansard. Given the uncommonness of the school name and its large Internet footprint as the first 'Fresh Start' school in England, my search was, I think, reasonably comprehensive. I attempted but failed to gain access to city council minutes relating to proposals to close of the school.

## 6.7 Data construction #3: artefacts

Artefacts provided another source of pre-manufactured objects which I was able to appoint as data/analysis under particular theoretical and textual conditions. These include: old photos; school reports; letters; school books; Save Blakelaw School campaign materials; newspaper clippings; social media content; two photographs produced for national newspapers depicting senior Labour politicians with Blakelaw pupils and Save Blakelaw

campaigners; and a teacher training video made in 1982 entitled 'Teaching Political Awareness Through Drama' and accompanying notes. The video was made by the famous educationalist Dorothy Heathcote and Newcastle University and featured 12-year-olds (including me) and sixth formers from Blakelaw. I also created new artefacts in the form of photographs inspired by this inquiry.

I used the artefacts as 'provocations to thought' (Turkle 2007, p. 5) and as a means of eliciting conversation with my contributors. I have also woven them into the text as non-human 'voices' that reflect and resist dominant discourses around education, achievement and surprising educational trajectories. They have the potential to communicate things that are 'hard to describe in writing at all' including the 'materiality of social life' (Rose, 2007, p. 247). I do this in order to emphasise the spatial and temporal relationships that frame my inquiry. By using images and artefacts in the production of the research text I am also attempting to address poststructural concerns about over-dependence on human voice 'as the truest, most authentic data and/or evidence' (St. Pierre, 2008, p. 319).

### 6.8 Data construction #4: everything else

In addition to the specific materials I've referred to above, I would also count as 'data' a wide range of theory , knowledge produced in other research paradigms, literary quotes, lyrics, music, theatrical productions and visual and performance artworks. Some of this data is present in the text, some absent, but all of it influenced the shaping and making of the thesis.

### 6.9 Methods of text production/representation

I have employed a range of inter-connecting methods of text production and textual representation, which are simultaneously methods of analysis. They include the use of terminology and concepts sous rature, the production of a layered text and writing as a method of inquiry.

## 6.10 Writing the subject sous rature

Attempting to write in an engaging way is tricky when one is also driven to write against the assumptions embedded in the binary-laden, categorical language that frames and produces official accounts of educational performance. Some writers argue that the very notion of the speaking subject, for example, a concept so central to the practice and products of empirical qualitative research, is incommensurable with a picture of the world captured through a poststructural lens. In contemplating the implications of Delueze and Guatarri's seminal A Thousand Plateaus (1987), St. Pierre writes:

> In an ontology of planes and surfaces on which bodies exist (humans, animals, language, revenge, dreams, the weather, green) and incorporeal somethings subsist (the not-yet), neither language nor the subject are separated or separable, individual or agentive, primary or secondary—they are mixed on the surface with everything else. I cannot see how our humanist methodologies are intelligible in that image of thought. (St. Pierre, 2017, p. 1087)

It is hard to argue with the extreme problematising of the 'I after I after I' (St. Pierre, 2017, p. 1087) associated with concepts like data, autoethnography and interviews if one positions oneself poststructurally. And yet I notice the names 'Deleuze' and 'Guatarri' printed on the book called A Thousand Plateaus. There are other names on the articles and books produced by those who write about it including 'Elisabeth St. Pierre'. Those identified as authors profit by the names given to them as babies. They enjoy the financial and social rewards – salaries, pensions, invitations to speak at conferences – that result from the assumption that the person who exists today deserves recognition for work undertaken by previous versions who share the same name and body. Even the poststructurally inclined who experiment with collective writing include their names at the beginning of a published paper (Wyatt *et al.*, 2014). Of course they do. They'll need to refer to those publications, claim them as their own, if they wish to apply for a

better job in future. I have included my name on the front of this thesis. I present myself and the many writers who have acted as intellectual and emotional travelling companions during this thesis writing journey as recognisable, if fragmented, individuals. How, then, could I deny the people who have contributed to my project the same privilege? True, 'the subject of the speech-act can never be the same as the one who acted yesterday' (Barthes, 1989, p. 17). But also true that 'the authority for the story begins with the body and memories of the [story teller] at the scene of lived experience (Gannon, 2006, p. 475).

Derrida's term 'sous rature', under erasure (1976), describes the processes involved in using familiar concepts in ways that acknowledge their inadequacy *and* their value. Writing sous rature enables me to maintain the familiar concept of the person in ways that take on board the challenges posed by poststructural thinking. The people I present here – myself and others...even you, Reader… are fragmented and partial, produced in a myriad of relations that make us what we are, what we once were, what we are seen to be, made to me, have the potential to be. The people in my thesis exist only in relation to others, both human and non-human, the discursive and the material. Their voices reveal things about power relations that extend beyond them and precede them because they reflect the systems of meaning and power they exist within, contribute to and resist. But they - we - are still intact, still recognisable as coherent beings with bodies and names who have been involved in a series of unfolding events the 'materializing effects [of which are] written into the world' (Barad 2012, p.67).

### 6.11 Production of a layered text

From a poststructural perspective there is no such thing as an independent text since the production and reading of all texts is 'determined by other texts' (Shank, 2008, p. 469). Layered accounts incorporate a range of texts which draws out the 'intertextuality' (Derrida, 1976) or connectedness of all language:

> As each layer of text is superimposed on the others, each layer contributes to the understanding of the other layers as well as to the overall picture of social life that the text conveys. (Ronai, 1999, p. 116)

Carol Rambo Ronai draws a parallel between the production of a layered text and a drawing to, not capture but give the impression of 'lived experience':

> Drawing entails laying down a few lines of information, viewing the lines, and then laying down or erasing other lines of information relative to the prior lines. Often, the first line does not survive the drawing process. The destructive activity of the eraser is as much a part of the drawing process. (Ronai, 1999, p. 115)

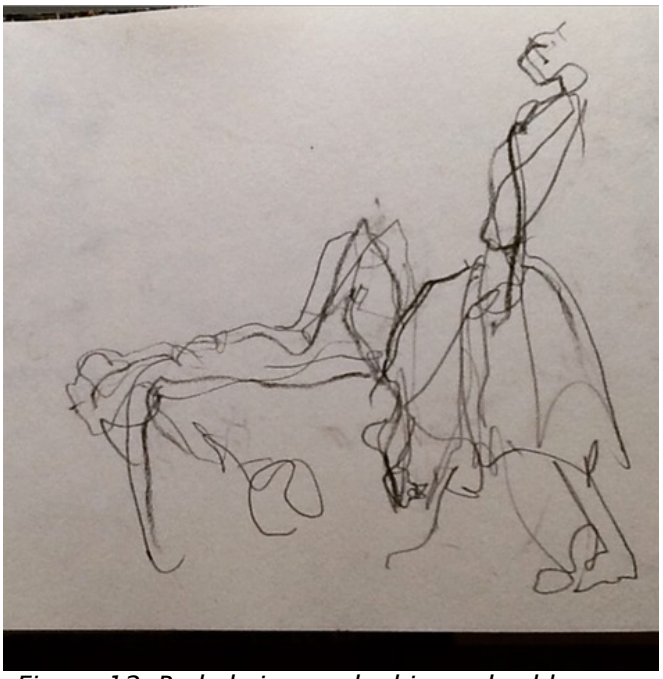


*Figure 12: Body being pushed in a wheel barrow, Marega Palser, 2018*

A layered text provides a means of addressing the implications of poststructural ideas for social research. Petersen (2014), for example, produces a split text, the upper half of each page written as a conventional report, the bottom half a 'juxta-text' that attempts to 'unsettle the

performance' of the text above by reminding the reader that it 'creates rather than depicts' a reality. I found this approach effective but hard work to read. I have attempted to achieve a similar effect in a form that is easier to read using a range of methods. In addition to writing sous rature these include: interspersing accounts that suggest personal history, agency and consciousness with descriptions of theory that encourage a scepticism towards such accounts; the co-existence of narrations that are apparently at odds with one another; the use of a range of first person author voices that frequently remind the reader that this thesis – any thesis – is a world-making construct that relates to a research process rather an after-the-fact, written account that corresponds with fixed events; the presentation in the text of a variety of 'voices', both human and nonhuman, in addition to the voices of my contributors and myself; writing that directs the reader to notice aspects of voice beyond speech, including accent, laughter, pauses and emotion; writing that reminds the reader that the academics I cite in order to lend authority to my work are themselves fragmented, complex, unfixed people. My approach to textual layering is underpinned by a citation practice that legitimises texts produced outside the academy as worthy conversational partners. This is why I don't have a 'literature review' but instead, a chapter called 'In conversation with' (ch. 7). This is a modest act of resistance against the male/economically privileged/Western/hetero/ White-ocentric assumptions and ways of being that dominate the academy and an attempt to open up thinking which resonates with the aims of a thinking with theory methodology.

My approach to textual layering has been shaped by: the influence of other academic writers (e.g. Petersen (2014), Trahar (2013); Choi (2013); Amatucci (2010); Rath (2012); Ronai (1999); and Lather (2007); Barad's concept of diffraction; the constraints I imposed on myself in the interests of engagement and accessibility; my appreciation of the literary, visual, musical and theatrical arts; my lack of technical skill in these areas; and the artefacts and memories that have presented themselves to me as such throughout the

thesis making process. Oh, and my experience of the craft of traditional upholstery.

### 6.12 Traditional upholstery as a layered text

In the period between giving up my career as a parliamentary researcher in the National Assembly for Wales and applying for a funded PhD place, I took a course in traditional upholstery. I wanted to take a different path for a while, see where it led me[4]. Upholstery works well as a metaphor for textual layering and poststructural deconstruction in general. Here is an excerpt from a blog post I wrote a few years before I encountered poststructural thinking.

> Upholstery is all about texture. The relationships between wood, metal, cotton, wool, hair and twine don't just affect the way something looks and feels. Upholstery as an activity produces what my friends who make radio programmes call textured sound. There's the creaking noise of a firmly embedded staple being levered out of old wood. The neat tap of my beloved magnetised hammer driving a small tack into welcoming wood. The sound is different when the wood is uncooperative, hollow, mean-spirited even. Then there's the barely audible sound made by cotton being pulled through top fabric as I ladder stitch the back panel onto an almost finished armchair and the brutal, high pitched noise made by the electric sander.

An upholstered chair, like a layered text, is not a 'thing' but an assemblage of material, emotion, ideas, times and places. Stitching can only exist in relation to the fabric through which it forges a path, the fabric itself a configuration of wool, sheep, land, farming, dye, human effort, skill, education and training, machinery, transportation and capitalism. A

[4] It led me here.

reupholstered chair doesn't come from one place or time. Traditional upholstery is a time-consuming, risky and expensive enterprise, not just for a novice like me but even for those with great skill and experience. You don't know how the finished piece will look or feel until you've finished. Even if you choose high quality supplies the combination might not work. Maybe you'll choose a beautiful top fabric but it'll look wrong on the chair and feels odd when it moves over the calico beneath it as you sit down. With traditional upholstery you have to remember that you are never entirely in control: the materials have means of making their presence known.

### 6.13 Writing as a method of inquiry

Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) present writing as a method of inquiry, a tool for finding things out rather than writing findings up. It is at once a method of data creation and a method of analysis which lends itself to a thinking with theory approach. According to Richardson, who coined the term:

> There is no such thing as "getting it right;' only "getting it" differently contoured and nuanced.

Sounds like a suitably poststructuralist approach to me. So what does it entail? Different things for different people. Walking, taking photos and recording my voice and ambient sounds are integral to my practice of writing as a method of inquiry. I like to walk. I walk for miles every day, sometimes to get from A to B and sometimes just to walk. I find it hard to sit still and write unless I walk first. Helene Cixous has written of the journaling of experience (as observations, reflections, dreams, reactions and over-heard snippets of conversations) 'that has been located or noticed for the first time' (Cixous and Calle-Gruber, 1994, p. 57). She wrote her thoughts down by hand because writing is a corporeal act that taps into the memories and knowledge of the writer (Cixous, p.x). When I'm out and about I use my mobile phone to record voice memos, documenting my thoughts as I walk, look, listen, feel and think. Whilst a digital recording is not tactile, it is

certainly richly sensuous. The resulting file contains not only my thoughts in the form of words but also my (geographically and emotionally) accented voice, as well as a host of other ambient sounds – footsteps, traffic, conversations, buskers, birds. The recordings thus provide both context and, in a Deleuzian sense, 'rhizomatic connections' that might prove fruitful for further inquiry (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, chap. 1). Sometimes I listen to the recording before I start to write, other times the act of recording and speaking and observing my environment is enough and I'm able to start writing as soon as I get in. I generally have some poststructurally inflected theory in mind as I write but I try not to constrain myself during a first draft. When I return to the writing, sometimes hours, sometimes, days, sometimes months later, I tend to redraft it purposefully with particular theory in mind. I produced the thinking with theory chapters 9, 11 and 13 by thinking about various pieced of writing alongside the materials I've gathered to consider which of them lend themselves to a particular theory or cluster of theories. This process of 'plugging texts into one another' (Jackson and Mazzei 2012, chap.1) involves acts of reading, thinking, listening, looking, feeling, holding, remembering, writing, losing, desiring, finding and making.

Writing as a method of inquiry provides a space for 'accidental and fortuitous connections [that one cannot] foresee or control' before they come into existence (p. 970). The fruitfulness of my experience of traditional upholstery, my blog writing experiences and my folding bike as means of illustrating aspects of poststructural and methodological thinking accessibly only emerged through the writing process, for example. Richardson and St. Pierre stress the importance of aesthetic merit and reflexivity (p.964) and the breaking down of writing genres including the literary, artistic and scientific (p. 963), both features which facilitate my aim of producing a thesis that the poststructurally uninitiated might find engaging.

The use of recollections, my own and other peoples', and official archives within my writing practice has enabled me to both expose and resist versions of social existence that are so familiar they have become invisible.

Like the assumption that formal education is a good thing or that fighting in school is a bad thing or that brightness and hard work are key in allowing some children to escape their educational and therefore social fate. Writing, framing, layering, opens up opportunities to see and present the world in different ways.

Writing as a method of inquiry has required me to hold my nerve at times because you can't know in advance that the time spent writing will produce anything workable, insightful, relevant. Sometimes the writing bears fruit. But I have files containing thousands of words that have not made the final cut.

I have found it incredibly hard to construct a 'finished product' to submit as a thesis. This is partly because the writing as a method of inquiry process has the potential to be never ending. I could take much of the writing contained in the Bourdieu chapter, for example and rewrite it to fit in the Foucault or the Barad chapters. Have I made the right choices? Have I done justice to the 'data', much of which I see as generous gifts from my contributors. Should I start again? It's also a reflection of the "ceaseless variations possible in [texts] that rely on a plugging in of ideas, fragments, theory, selves, sensations" (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012, p.1).

### 6.14 Thinking about educational trajectories as journeys

From a poststructural perspective metaphor is not 'a detour to truth' because 'there is no pure language that is free from metaphor' (Gayatri Spivak in Derrida 1976, p.lxxiv). Metaphors are not something to be cracked or code broken but a means of gesturing towards that which always exceeds attempts to represent it. The point also holds for analogies with their emphasis on relationships. Thinking with the notion of a journey has been an important facilitator of my writing as a method of inquiry. Describing a person's life as a journey, especially a life that has taken some unexpected turns, is a well-worn device. Type "It's been an amazing journey" into Google and the search engine will yield thousands of results. Common examples of

amazing journeys include the musical performer's passage from obscurity to fame via TV talent show, the careers of actors or sporting professionals and the experiences of people who have established companies that have grown and become financially successful. These amazing journey tales tend to focus on the talented, determined, hard-working individuals at the centre of the story, the challenges they have overcome to get where they are today, and their gratitude for the support they've had from loved ones.

For this reason, I was initially reticent about using a journey analogy in my project. It wasn't its unoriginality that worried me. People tend to be comfortable with the idea and practice of describing their educational trajectories in terms of a journey (see, e.g., Getty (2010); Schoorman (2014); and Trahar (2006; 2013)) which is an advantage when you're attempting to write in an accessible way. What did concern me was the question of whether the journey analogy was likely to be fruitful when applied to a project framed by poststructural ideas. Consider this argument:

> In the modern era, the concept of travel is now more than ever bound up with the production, commodification, and consumption of images, including travel shows, postcards, selfies, and maps, all of which do not simply function as substitutes for those who cannot travel, or souvenirs for those who have. They also work to structure the imagination of travel and the very experience of the journey itself, by providing a "script" of expectations. (Ng-Chan, 2015, p.561)

As someone who sees language as constituting reality rather than simply corresponding to it, I've considered whether a similar case could be made about the 'script of expectations' available to those of us who think about educational trajectories as journeys. Might such an approach structure the imagination to produce life-stories that are too smooth, too heroic, 'too-easy-to-tell' (Britzman 1998, p.13)? Might it reinforce the very assumptions poststructural thinking works to unpick? That time has a linear significance, that people have essential qualities and identities, that a combination of

hard work, determination and natural intelligence will enable a person to thrive, whatever the conditions of their upbringing?

I considered these questions and concluded (as far as a poststructurally inclined person can reach a conclusion about anything) that it was safe to proceed. Journeys don't have to be linear or progressive or singular. A poststructurally conceived of journey allows for a shifting, deeply relational, non-binary focus on what are generally termed 'structure' (the social forces that shape our lives but are outside our control) and 'agency' (the capacity of an individual to act independently and make their own choices). By holding in mind poststructural ideas and the notion of formal education as a journey we might begin to notice relationships within an entangled assemblage of phenomena including: the modes of transport accessible to the traveller, their hopes and expectations for the trip, their possession, or not, of a valid ticket, the presence or absence of road blocks, their relationships with fellow travellers, the tips and tools their parents gave them before they set off, the music they listen to and books they read along the way, their planning skills, ability to adapt, sense of direction, susceptibility to homesickness and their willingness to ignore No Entry signs. In addition to 'amazing journeys', we might be more inclined to consider wasted journeys, interminable journeys, the experience of getting lost, journeys where you are so engrossed in something else that you forget that you're moving and get a shock when you arrive and are asked to get off the bus. We might pay more attention to the material components of a journey: the terrain, equipment, views, blind alleys, signposts, maps, paths, shelters, weather conditions and the ways in which our bodies – pale skin, big feet, strong arms - help us to make progress or hold us back. And we might begin to realise that the co-ordinates of experience we join up in order to trace a path between past and present change over time as we forget, remember and reinterpret what has happened to us. So that what was once a missed turning with terrible consequences now looks more like a shortcut, an irrelevance or perhaps the beginning of a new, bravely forged path.

### 6.15 A few words on ethics

I was granted ethical approval to undertake my research by the Bristol University Postgraduate School of Education Ethics Committee in August 2015 (see Appendix A). MacLure describes 'working the ruins', a term associated with poststructurally positioned social research, as 'an ethical and a political project as well as a methodological one' (2011, p.998). I wanted my PhD to be an ethically driven project but found it difficult, initially, to identify an ethical ambition that would make sense within my chosen paradigm. I knew I couldn't claim to 'give voice to' a particular group or critique an ideology to reveal what was 'really' going on. The first time my contributor Sara and I spoke about Blakelaw and our subsequent journeys into elite universities she said "I think it's just absolutely fascinating and I think it's an untold story". My contributors have a range of perspectives on the impact going to Blakelaw had on their journeys into higher education. I came to see a potential ethical power of my project in its capacity to provide space for versions of events and selves at odds with or at least more complicated than those contained in publicly available archives.

I have talked about the multi-perspectival nature of my project with my contributors. I am mindful that some of them might be disappointed by the equivocal nature of my writing, especially those who hold passionate views about the social inequalities of the past and present. I have given my contributors an opportunity to respond to sections of the thesis (or the whole thesis if they are interested) and have incorporated their responses into the draft you are now reading.

As indicated in chapter 3, poststructuralist theories provide a take on the social world that I find persuasive and attractive. To break free of the shackles of this/that and either/or is liberating and energising. The overlap between my worldview and chosen research paradigm has enabled me to construct 'conditions for undertaking the research that are compatible with self-respect' (Bond, 2004). However, the closeness between my worldview and chosen research paradigm also presents ethical risks. For example, I

must remain vigilant against 'wilful blindness' (Heffernan, 2011) to the limitations of the poststructuralism paradigm. I once submitted work to my supervisors and was surprised when they warned me against the construction of straw men in relation to non-poststructuralist research paradigms. I value research produced within a range of paradigms that defines and reveals inequalities. I also take seriously the postmodern tenet that no single form of knowledge production can claim superior authority. I came to realize that, having relied heavily on the words of established academics to bolster my own position, I had inadvertently communicated a view about the superiority of poststructuralist approaches that underpins, unconsciously I suspect, some poststructurally positioned writing. In subsequent drafts I moved away from critiquing paradigms to more fully embrace the strengths and limitations of my own.

I made my decision to take an autoethnographic approach to my research having had the benefit of taking an MSc module on the topic and testing it out within my MSc research (Rogers, 2014). I have read a lot about the potential risks and pitfalls of autoethnography (e.g.; Baker 2013; Tullis Owen et al. 2008;  Delamont 2009). I am a fairly open person. And yet, I have found the process of sharing details of my life within an academic context stressful and embarrassing at times.  I worry I'll appear self-obsessed and wonder about the wisdom of admitting that I am easily distracted, a slow reader and writer and that I don't always feel mentally healthy, given that I might want to work in academia in the future. This experience has helped me consider more carefully what I write about and choose to reveal. Crucially, the experience has given me an appreciation of the need for sensitivity and support even where I am satisfied that a contributor's consent is well informed and thought through: an enthusiastic willingness to take part in the project will not necessarily protect a person from future discomfort at the thought of what has been revealed. For this reason I have made a decision to omit accounts of some incidents even where my contributors have given me permission to use them.

I have given my contributors 'Notes of Guidance' based on those drawn up by my supervisor for her own PhD project (Trahar 2006) which provide an overview of the project and details of their role and my responsibilities (see Appendix B). The notes address the recording of conversations, the right to withdraw consent, the use of pseudonyms, the limitations of anonymity, my use of stories that refer to people who have not agreed to be involved in the project and my commitment to share with contributors any writing that refers to them and to respond to feedback. My recent insights around my decision to take an autoethnographic approach emphasise the importance of an on-going approach to gaining (and losing) consent. In the case of friends and family contributors in particular, I am aware of the need for sensitivity to non-overt expressions of desire to opt out (Wiles, Crow and Pain, 2011). My focus on a single school makes anonymity problematic since former Blakelaw graduates are a relatively small and interconnected group. The opportunities afforded by the presentation of people and their stories in context have to be balanced against the implications of making them easily identifiable. I considered but decided against the presentation of some accounts through an invented/composite contributor (see, e.g., Reed 2011) since this seemed incompatible with my decision to represent my contributors and myself as intact people, each with their own multifaceted journey. The issue of who owns a story and who has the final say in whether and how it is presented is a complex matter and one I have considered on a case by case basis in conversation and in light of relevant literature (e.g. Adams, 2008; Delamont 2009; Shuman, 2005; Sikes, 2006). I address the issue of my authorial privilege and its ethical implications at various points throughout the thesis. Since I have used verbatim excerpts from conversations with contributors I ask myself

> [w]ho decides what 'exact words' should be used in the accounts? Who was listened to, and how were they listened to? How might voices be distorted and fictionalized in the process of reinsciption? And indeed, how are those voices necessarily distorted and fictionalized in the process of reinscrpiption? (Jackson & Mazzei 2009, p.2)

I have addressed a handful of ethical considerations here but you should expect to see evidence of my responsibility and accountability woven though the thesis as a whole.

### 6.16 Quality criteria

As discussed in 4.16, the poststructural rejection of foundational truths poses a challenge to the idea that it's possible to identify criteria against which the quality of a research text and the processes involved in its production – its 'goodness' - can be judged. I have formulated some criteria sous rature in the sense that they are 'inaccurate, yet necessary' (Spivak 1976, p.xiv). They are based on my understanding of the tenets of poststructural thinking and on criteria suggested by poststructurally inclined writer-researchers, in particular Patti Lather (2007), Laurel Richardson and Elizabeth St. Pierre (2005), Patricia Clough (2000) and Cho and Trent, 2006).

- Is the work consistent with its proclaimed poststructural positionality? Does it acknowledge and grapple with the implications of poststructural thinking for data driven research? (I hold in mind Lather's poststructural validity framings in particular here, see 4.16.)
- Does the use of creative analytical practices open up the text and invite interpretive responses? Is the text engaging, satisfying, complex and not boring?
- Is the text reflexive? How did the author come to write it? How was the information gathered? Does the version of self presented enable the reader to make judgments about the point of view from which the text was written?
- Does the text provide a theoretically reflective critique that encourages the reader to think about the world and themselves in it differently and ask new questions?
- Does the text prompt the reader to consider their role as reader and its implications for their response to the text, emotionally, intellectually and in terms of action?
- Does the text DO something interesting?

I've used these criteria to ensure I stay on the right track.

# Chapter 7

# In Conversation With

*My private model for intersubjectivity, or communication by speech, or conversation, is amoebas having sex. As you know, amoebas usually reproduce by just quietly going off in a corner and budding, dividing themselves into two amoebas; but sometimes conditions indicate that a little genetic swapping might improve the local crowd, and two of them get together, literally, and reach out to each other and meld their pseudopodia into a little tube or channel connecting them. Then amoeba A and amoeba B exchange genetic "information," that is, they literally give each other inner bits of their bodies, via a channel or bridge which is made out of outer bits of their bodies. They hang out for quite a while sending bits of themselves back and forth, mutually responding each to the other. This is very similar to how people unite themselves and give each other parts of themselves — inner parts, mental not bodily parts—when they talk and listen.*

Ursuala K. Le Guin, 2004 'Telling Is Listening'

## 7.1 Purpose of the chapter

This chapter should give you a clearer sense of the kind of texts that have served as sources of orientation, inspiration and provocation in the production of this thesis. It is not a 'literature review'. Whilst I have chosen to work sous rature with a number of 'inaccurate, yet necessary' research terms and concepts I have taken a more experimental approach in the positioning of my thesis in relation to other knowledge-producing texts. My approach is based on the metaphor of the conversation for reasons I set out in section 7.2. In sections 7.3 to 7.6 I provide an overview of the texts and text producers with whom my thesis is in conversation including: the 'widening participation' and related literature (7.3); poststructural theory, the theories I have used to think with in chapters 8 – 13 (7.4); a selection of texts and text makers which are 'present absences' within the thesis (7.5); and a selection of texts produced outside the academy and/or take a different form to those generally included in a doctoral thesis literature review (7.6). In 7.7 I reflect on the connections between these texts.

## 7.2 The benefits of conversation

Poststructuralist thinking, in its emphasis on positionality *and* antipathy towards categories, genres and clear-cut boundaries presents a conundrum regarding the situating of a thesis in relation to the academic literature within a field of study. This thesis is shot through with fragments, suggestions, traces and representations of the world formulated within a range of epistemological and creative paradigms, all of which have left their mark on the text (and on me) in one way or another. How to express this in a way that responds to the implications of poststructural thinking set out in chapter 4? I have opted to use the metaphor of the conversation.

For the poststructurally inclined researcher, or at least to me, the notion of being 'in conversation with' is preferable to that of 'literature review' because it emphasises relationship over one-sided criticism, has a capacity for inclusivity and encourages 'responsibility to the entanglements of which

we are a part' (Barad 2012, p.52). In both metaphorical and literal contexts conversation has a number of functions and effects including dis/orientation, provocation, connection, recollection, inspiration, introduction, understanding, realization and galvanisation. Good conversations foster companionship and an awareness that even those of us drawn to outskirts and inbetween places are only ever beings 'in relation' to other beings, bodies, ideas and places. A good conversation is a threshold beyond which there is no turning back because we are changed by it.

*Figure 13: Staffie, water and diffraction patterns, DAR, May 2018*

Karen Barad's metaphor-concept of diffraction (Barad 2012) works well alongside the metaphor of the good conversation. Diffraction patterns are exhibited by water, sound and light waves when they encounter another body. As bodies collide they produce lively new patterns that overlap with and distort that which previously existed. Through this lens texts are not pre-existing, stand-alone entities, but entangled forces with the capacity to produce new patterns of understanding through the act of reading. To put it another way, when we read a text we do so through a lens that incorporates everything we have previously read and experienced. And what we bring to our reading, consciously or not, makes a difference to the patterns of thinking and being created when ideas and experience collide.

I have attempted, in various ways, to show how my thesis has been produced in conversation with other texts. I define texts broadly as manifestations of ideas and interpretations, written and otherwise. In this chapter I cite texts that would not usually be included in a literature review including those

produced outside the academy and some that speak of concepts and concept builders which are apparently absent within the body of the thesis as a whole. I sometimes use the full names of academics and theorists who have influenced my thinking to remind the reader and myself that they too are (or were) embodied people whose ideas, like them, change(d) over time. My inclusion of some quotations in which one thinker quotes the words of another – a mildly subversive practice since we should always, we are taught, quote from the original source – is a means of showing how insights are produced diffractively, 'through one another' (Barad 2012, p. 50). The layered structure of the thesis also serves, I hope, to emphasise the intertextuality or connectedness of the quotations, theories, narrative accounts and images which work in conjunction with one another to produce impressions of social life.

My presentation of myself as a fragmented but embodied person with a history is also a manifestation of a conversation. I reflect on how texts have changed me and how my first encounter with some texts was akin to meeting a person I'd yearned for despite not previously knowing of their existence. Rather than trying to mask my involvement in the selecting of literature beyond the application of search criteria relating to research questions, I draw readers' attention to some of the personal preferences, strengths and struggles that have come into play in determining inclusions and exclusions: that I am a slow but careful reader and writer; that my attention flits from one thing to another which makes it difficult to focus but easy to make connections; that I find it hard to sit still for long; how I lack 'common sense' which means I don't always get 'the point' but do have an ability to look at things from different angles; that I am relaxed with the state of agnosticism. All these things have had an impact on what I came to read and the marks left on me and on the thesis as a result of our encounters.

This boundary breeching refusal to restrict the conversation to a particular archive is an act of resistance underpinned by citation practices that

legitimize texts produced outside the academy as worthy of inclusion. Whilst I'd hesitate to describe my thesis as an act of feminist criticism, something rings true in Culler's statement quoted by Dolphijn & van der Tuin in their book New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies (2012, p.85)

> Men have aligned the opposition male/female with rational/ emotional, serious/frivolous, or reflective/spontaneous, [whereas] feminist criticism [...] works to prove itself more rational, serious, and reflective than male readings that omit and distort (Culler [1982] 2008, 58).

Certainly, my approach is an attempt to open up representations of the process of academic textual production in a way that chimes with my poststructural positioning.

Here is an overview of some of the texts that came to matter in the production of the one you're reading now.

### 7.3 The 'widening participation' literature

Broadly speaking, the widening participation literature incorporates published research that attempts to define, identify and explore what are deemed to be unequal and unfair patterns in the performance and participation of certain groups in formal education and higher education in particular. Findings from such studies are sometimes used to 'hold governments to account for their policies' (Lauder, Brown and Halsey, 2004, p. 4), by contributing to and scrutinising the 'widening participation' (HEFCE, 2014) and 'widening access' (HEFCW 2014) policy agendas in England and Wales (e.g. Field 2010).

There is broad agreement within educational academia that:

> an individual's probability of participating in higher education is significantly determined by their parents' characteristics, particularly

> their parents' education level and/or socio-economic status. (Chowdry et al 2010, p.6)

Coming from a poor background and your parents not having any qualifications is a better predictor of the qualifications you'll end up with and the money you'll earn than the abilities you have before you start school. According to Feinstein (2003), the effects of social class background are apparent before children reach nursery school. On the basis of his analysis of a sample of almost 2,500 children, Feinstein concluded that:

> having a low test ranking at 22 months does not matter decisively for a child's future position in the distribution unless the child has low SES [socio-economic status] parents as well, in which case the position is unlikely to improve greatly. Furthermore, a low SES child with a top quartile score at 22 months is predicted to fall behind high SES peers who had low quartile scores at 22 months. (p.30)

Whilst the effects of social class were mediated and moderated by many other factors including 'good housing' (Feinstein et al. 2004, p. 7) and 'growing up in a home rich in cognitive stimulation and educational opportunities' (p.31), parental education remained key (p. 34).

Those children from poorer backgrounds who do continue to do well in primary school are still likely to be at a disadvantage when it comes to their higher education according to Crawford & Macmillan (2014):

> Of the 7,853 children from the most deprived homes who achieve level 5 in English and maths at age 11, only 906 make it to an elite university. If they had the same trajectory as a child from one of the least deprived families, then 3,066 of these children would be likely to go to an elite university. (p.9)

School type also impacts on participation in higher education. Research undertaken by the Sutton Trust using data from 3167 schools found that pupils from independent schools were more than twice as likely to be

accepted into one of the 30 most selective universities as comprehensive school pupils (Sutton Trust, 2011, p. 2). During the same period, four elite schools and one college sent more students to Oxbridge than 2,000 schools and colleges across the UK (ibid, p.2). Boliver (2013) found that applicants from state schools were less likely to be offered a place at a Russell Group university than peers with the same A Level scores from private schools, with the same true for non-White applicants (p.358). Studies also indicates that students whose parents are not university graduates are less likely to achieve a good degree outcome (Smith & Robin 2001) and those from lower social class backgrounds are more likely to drop out of university (Arulampalam et al. 2005).

Statistical explorations of patterns in participation in postgraduate programmes tend to focus on immediate transition from undergraduate to postgraduate study. Wakeling & Hampden-Thompson (2013) for example, found that former independent school pupils and those who reported that their parents had a higher education qualification progressed more frequently to higher degrees. They have little to say about the experiences of people who do not progress immediately, just over 60% of all UK-domiciled postgraduate entrants in 2011-12 (Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson, 2013). Nor do they shed light on the activities people engage in between, and during, their participation in higher education.

…….

Over the course of my first year at Bristol, I came to realise that my initial doctoral research proposal was practically unfeasible. Given my slow reading pace, my unfamiliarity with the academic literature in other subjects within the field of education, and the fact I was now a year into my studies I set about thinking of a new project that would enable me to make the most of the knowledge I'd gained.

And here we are.

It took a while before I started to question the centrality of the widening participation literature in my new project. I started to explore other interconnected bodies of literature, for example, that relating to 'unexpected educational trajectories (e.g. Duncan 2008; Feinstein & Peck 2008; Messersmith & Schulenberg 2008); and social mobility (e.g. Francis & Hutchings 2013; Brown et al. 2013). I found the work of the Cambridge University academic Diane Reay in particular rich, engaging and persuasive. Something about her explorations of participation in higher education, class identity and social mobility through Bourdieusian and feminist theoretical lenses (e.g. 2003; 2001; 2004; 2012; Reay et al. 2009; Reay 2017) chimed. I suspect this might have had something to do with the fact that she too is from a working class, council housed background and had a family history coloured with tales of illegitimacy, poverty, unrealized academic potential and an influential grandmother. She revealed this biographical information in an article problematizing dominant discourses of social mobility (Reay 2013). Citing the words below by the political historian and social critic R.H. Tawney, she concluded that social mobility discourses are 'the stuff of tadpoles, frogs and naked emperors' (p.675):

> It is possible that tadpoles reconcile themselves to the inconveniences of their position, by reflecting that, though most of them will live and die as tadpoles and nothing more, the more fortunate of the species will one day shed their tails, distend their mouths and stomachs, hop nimbly onto dry land, and croak addresses to their former friends on the virtues by means of which tadpoles of character and capacity can rise to be frogs. This conception of society may be described, perhaps, as the Tadpole Philosophy, since the consolation which it offers for social evils consists in the statement that exceptional individuals can succeed in evading them. (Tawney, 1964, p. 105)

On reading this article I recognized my desire, shared with Reay and other producers of widening participation literature, to undermine this 'brightest and best' myth and its implied assumption that the educational 'successes'

and ‘failures’ of people from economically poorer circumstances are a consequence of ability and effort. There was, however, something about this body of literature that did not ‘click’. Something niggled. Initially, I assumed the reason for this was its focus on younger people from lower socio-economic backgrounds who do well in school and progress immediately to university. I could not see myself, for example, in Reay et al’s study of ‘highly academically successful’ (2010, p.1104) working class elite university students, much less my friend Rob, who was functionally illiterate when he left school, or my brother David, who did an Open University degree 25 years after leaving school. I wondered for a time whether the value of my research lay in its longitudinal focus which allows me to capture the experiences of those who did not excel in school but did eventually make it to university to gain both undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications.

But no. This is not a ‘gap in the literature’ study. My project is poststructurally positioned and so it makes no sense to located it within a field of literature underpinned by the type of categorical thinking and writing that poststructuralist approaches work against. I eventually came to realise that the widening participation and related literature could not have a special status within my project. And yet, this body of literature is, still, an indispensable component of my project, one of the conditions of possibility without which it would never have existed. Paradoxically, if one is concerned with the impact of power relations on ‘the Other’, be that ‘women’, ‘the underprivileged’, ‘the colonised’ or ‘the queer’, then one must be persuaded at some level by the claims of researchers working in other theoretical paradigms who demonstrate durable power imbalances based on the very social categories that poststructuralists seek to undermine. Understanding social categories as the non-essential result of a dynamic between language, practice, bodies and matter does not require me to deny the impact of categorisation on people’s lives. I accept the premise that performance and participation in higher education is significantly influenced by parental characteristics, particularly education level and/or socio-economic status. But given my theoretical positioning, my interest is not only in the

sedimented power dynamics in which people can get stuck but also the intersections, collisions and constellations that render unlikely outcomes possible.

## 7.4 The theoretical literature

As you know, this project is underpinned by poststructural thinking, some key features of which I set out in chapter 4. You might recall that one of my ambitions is to undertake a social research project that is responsive to the implications of such a worldview. This might seem too obvious a task to count as an ambition in a doctoral thesis. Surely any researcher who claims a particular methodological positionality will, as a matter of course, attempt to work within the framework of its philosophical assumptions and concerns? Not necessarily, it seems. The poststructurally inclined writer-researchers Maggie MacLure, Elisabeth St. Pierre and Eva Bendix Petersen have all expressed frustration at the 'realist baggage' (Petersen, 2014, p. 149) displayed by researchers who poststructurally position themselves:

> We have theorized decentered selves, partial knowledge, and layered accounts. But when it comes to analyzing the "data"—interviews, observations, documents, and so on— we often end up, once again, digging up themes or stacking up categories, or finding or enforcing innocence, literal meaning, and uncomplicated goodwill (MacLure, 2011, p. 998).

Petersen (2014), in analysing a number of poststructurally positioned journal articles found a lack of author reflection on 'their own discursive practices in establishing scholarly authority' (p. 153), and on author 'world-making practices' (p.153). The majority of articles about data-driven research, she found, were 'structured according to social sciences report writing conventions: background–method–analysis–conclusion' with most written in the first person (p.154).

St. Pierre has described how, in 2011, she coined the deliberately 'rather large and ambiguous term' post-qualitative to highlight what she saw as the incommensurability of conventional humanist qualitative methodology and 'the posts' (2014, p.3).

The concern, then, does not so much relate to the disappointments, struggles and stuck places associated with attempts to put poststructural theory to work. As MacLure acknowledges 'my own work has failed as much, if not more than anyone else's in managing to be ruinous' (2011, p.998). Rather, the concern is about the failure of researchers who claim a poststructural position to employ a methodology that attempts to engage fruitfully with the ontological and epistemological implications of poststructural theory.

St. Pierre does point to a number of successful theses produced by her former doctoral students. For example, Amatucci (2009) 'plugs in' poetry, performative ethnography, narrative and what she calls 'senses of home and heart' to a range of theories associated with Butler, Foucault, Baudrillard, Derrida, Marx, Deleuze and Bhabha to explore tangled teacher subjectivities. Another example is provided by Augustine's 2010 study of academics' reading practices in which she uses Delueze and Guattari's concept of the assemblage to explore how her academic participants 'used books to do things' and as a way of rethinking conventional qualitative research methodology:

> My purpose was not to access a transcendental or interior commodity from my participants; instead, their conversations and scholarship, our relationships, my reading, and my writing machined together to create glimpses into reading as a practice of connections. (p.63)

I've enjoyed conversing (via their theses) with Augustine and Amatucci, both of whom responded honestly and imaginatively to the challenges posed by poststructural thinking within the context of doctoral thesis production. Other influential theory-research texts with whom I have enjoyed thought

provoking conversations include: Getting Lost, Patti Lather's deconstruction of her earlier experimental ethnography of women with AIDS (2007), Foucault, Power, and Education, Stephen Ball's Foucauldian consideration of UK education policy (2013), Thinking with Theory, Mazzei and Jackson's analysis of interviews with 10 first generation academics (2012) and Bacchi and Goodwin's Poststructural Policy Analysis: A Guide to Practice (2016). As the titles suggest – 'Getting Lost' / 'A Guide to Practice' - some of these texts take a more linear approach to the presentation of their methodology than others. Collectively, they serve to remind me that there are no pre-designed strategies, no manuals to guide the poststructurally inclined researcher through a process that produces a 'valid' output. Instead there are ideas to be engaged with, experimented with, put to work.

I have put three theories, or clusters of theory, to work in part 2 of my thesis: Bourdieu's conceptual triad, habitus, field, Barad's Intra-action and capital Foucault's thinking on the subject. I provide an overview of relevant concepts in chapter 8, 10 and 12 which I use in chapters 9,11 and 13 to explore the conditions of possibility under which my contributors and I went on to university. I'll just say a few words here about why I chose to converse with these particular theories and theorists.

*Foucault's subject*

Michel Foucault wrote against the fixed, essential, self-aware subject, rejecting the idea that people hold within them identities and characteristics - being female, being clever, being hard working for example - that remain stable across time and within different contexts. I was drawn to this theory for two reasons. The first concerns the creation of Blakelaw School itself as a subject, at once the 'failing school' of government performance measures, the school parents and pupils fought passionately to save and the school remembered fondly, unhappily, angrily, proudly by my contributors and I. The second relates to the ways in which my contributors and I were positioned as subjects in relation to Blakelaw to differing material effects. I explore these areas of curiosity in chapter 9.

*Barad's Intra-action*

Karen Barad's concept of 'intra-action' stresses the mangled, inseparable discursive/material context in which subjects and objects emerge. Barad is located within the 'new materialist' school of thought, a 'new tradition' (Dolphijn & van der Tuin 2012, p.14) that seeks to redress the imbalance in focus on language over matter in poststructurally inclined social theoretical thinking:

> 'Language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters. There is an important sense in which the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter.' (Barad 2003, p.801)

Working with Bohrian quantum theory as a [more than a] metaphor, Barad's produces a theoretical space in which past, present and future, freed from assumptions about the linear, fixed nature of the passage of time, are full of potential to become something different. In other words, Barad insists that the past is open to change (see, e.g. Barad in Dolphijn & van der Tuin 2012, p.66) .

I was drawn to Barad's theory of intra-action and its emphasis on the discursive/material co-production of the world because my experience of having been a pupil at Blakelaw School and going on to Oxford University was embodied and material: the (lack of a) school uniform, the 2.6 mile distance between the school and my house, the gift of a book from a teacher, the way I walked and our relatively low household income were all part of the constellation of things, events and interpretations against which my formal educational trajectory was actualised. When I asked my contributors to reflect on their school days and subsequent entry into higher education they told tales of messy handwriting and sandwiches launched as weapons, campaign placards and premenstrual tension, Doctor Marten boots and broken bones. Thinking with intra-action has the capacity to draw our

attention to that which might otherwise be left unattended and encourages us to consider how small things come to matter.

I was also drawn to the redemptive capability of intra-action as a theory that challenges the assumption that the passage of time is linear and fixed, something I'd previously thought about through the lens of Walter Benjamin's notion of history. I experiment with these ideas in chapter 11.

My use of intra-action to think with is consistent with my poststructural positioning because new materialism:

> does not add something to thought (a series of ideas that wasn't there, that was left out by others). It rather traverses and thereby rewrites thinking as a whole, leaving nothing untouched, redirecting every possible idea according to its new sense of orientation (Dolphijn & van der Tuin 2012, p.13).

Barad's concept of intra-action can accommodate and be accommodated within a poststructural framework broad enough to embrace reworkings of its own non-essential, deeply relational, onto-epistemological underpinnings.

*Bourdieu's habitus, field and capital*

The question of epistemological 'fit' is more debatable when it comes to my decision to work with Pierre Bourdieu's 'thinking tools' (Wacquant 1989, p.50). Bourdieu was a French sociologist who aimed to account for the existence and reproduction of patterns of social inequalities. I encountered Bourdieu a year or so before I was awarded my PhD place. I experienced an immediate sense of recognition, a 'feel' for his thinking despite the complexity of his writing and my limited exposure to academic sociology. I grasped the entangled, deeply relational nature of 'habitus', 'field' and the various types of 'capital' and enjoyed using them to scrutinise my own surprising educational trajectory. I hadn't come across the notion of 'the binary' at this stage but I 'instinctively' liked his refusal to engage in an overly-simplistic individual agency/structure debate. Bourdieu helped me win

a funded PhD place by giving me fruitful theory on which to base my proposal and by leading me to academics and PhD students who were willing and able to guide me. It wasn't just the ideas I was drawn to. Bourdieu the man, or at least the version of the man I constructed from film footage and writing, his own and other people's, seemed kind, clever and remarkably unpompous given his position. And whilst my journey from Blakelaw School to Oxford University was less radical than Bourdieu's, I found his account of his 'cleft habitus', a state of embodied tension and contradiction resulting from a discrepancy between his lowly social origin and high status within the academy, emotionally affecting. Its evocation of the perpetual, if low level, discomfort and ambivalence that results from being able to speak two languages, neither entirely fluently, made me feel less lonely, less odd.

But I've already told you that I later developed a similarly personal attachment to poststructural thinking. Wouldn't it be better to let go, move on and choose another 'post' positioned theorist to think with? Perhaps. There are certainly tensions between what you might call poststructural and Bourdieusian approaches to research and writing. Bourdieu's sociological output consistently points to the durability of the mechanisms of social reproduction which means that poor children are likely to become poor adults, irrespective of their potential to be something else (e.g. see Bourdieu 1999):

> I am often stunned by the degree to which things are determined: sometimes I think to myself, "This is impossible, people are going to think I exaggerate." And believe me, I do not rejoice over this. Indeed, I think that if I perceive necessity so acutely, it is because I find it so unbearable. As an individual, I personally suffer when I see somebody trapped by necessity, whether it be the necessity of the poor or that of the rich. (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 200)

Isn't this emphasis on predictability at odds with a poststructural approach that rejects categorical thinking and the over- and under-stating of differences and similarities that provide the conditions for its claims?

Then there is the issue of epistemology. As I've already stated in 4.18, Bourdieu did acknowledge that there is no neutral ground from which the researcher can scrutinise a research object or themselves (see 'Sketch for Self-Analysis' (2008) and 'An invitation to reflexive sociology' (1992)). However, whilst he did not write against the associated 'crisis of representation' that underpins poststructural thinking, Bourdieu's primary concern was the generation of analyses as 'objective' or 'correct' as possible under the circumstances. And whilst he did write against universalism, which he described as a 'kingly, divine ambition' and 'a tremendous source of error' (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 33), he did not routinely pick at and undermine his own conclusions. As a result, Bourdieu's epistemological claims are 'stronger' in the sense that they are less tentative than those whose work is underpinned by postsructural theories, including my own.

Some academics who write and conduct research from Bourdieusian ground have expressed concerns about those who use Bourdieu's theories without paying sufficient attention to the philosophical assumptions that underpin them. In a review article entitled 'Where Now for Bourdieu-inspired Sociology?' (2012), for example, Will Atkinson bemoans acts of 'partial appropriation', 'a seemingly a British speciality' (p. 169), which treat Bourdieu's theory as:

> 'a 'toolkit' to be ransacked, selectively applied, mashed with other ideas and twisted as empirical findings dictate' (ibid).

I read Atkinson's article around the same time I attended a meeting of the British Sociological Society's Bourdieu Study Group at which several people spoke about their frustration at the mis-use of Bourdieu's theory by those who don't understand it properly and the resulting profusion of unnecessary "bullshit capitals", as one speaker put it, presented as additional to Bourdieu's originals, that is economic, social, cultural and symbolic capitals. My initial reaction to both article and study group was perhaps typical of a poststructurally orientated person: I read them as attempts to police the 'Bourdieu border' as a means of maintaining and enhancing their position as

Bourdieu experts. But I also recognise a resonance with the frustrations expressed by St. Pierre (2014), Petersen (2014) and MacLure (2011) at the failure of researcher-writers who claim their work is informed by poststructural theories to respond to the associated challenges of such a worldview (which I've discussed in 7.4). And since this thesis is an attempt to rise to these very challenges, I spent some time considering how thinking about how Bourdieu's theory might make sense from a poststructural perspective, particularly in relation to epistemology, his focus on predictability and the ways in which other poststructurally inclined writer-researchers have used his theory in their own work:

*Epistemology*

Bourdieu, like Barad and Foucault, was an onto-epistemological thinker in that he rejected the binary distinction between what exists and what can be known about what exists. His ideas are underpinned by an understanding of language as productive, rather than simply descriptive, of social reality.

> In the social world, words make things, because they make the consensus on the existence and the meaning of things, the common sense, the doxa accepted by all as self-evident. (Bourdieu 1998, p.67)

Bourdieu illustrated this position in relation to the concept of the 'family' as follows:

> It can be said without contradiction both that social realities are social fictions with no other basis than social construction, and that they really exist, inasmuch as they are collectively recognized. Every time we use a classificatory concept like "family," we are making both a description and a prescription, which is not perceived as such because it is (more or less) universally accepted and goes without saying. We tacitly admit that the reality to which we give the name "family," and which we place in the category of "real" families, is a family in reality. (Bourdieu, 1998b, p. 66)

Our understanding and experience of 'family' is real, weighty and central to Bourdieu's theoretical triad because primary social experiences have a 'disproportionate weight' in shaping the habitus (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 134). This is not to say that 'the family', as an idea and a 'lived reality' is fixed or essential since 'the social world can be uttered and constructed in different ways' (Bourdieu, 2001b, p.298).

As I've already stated, Bourdieusian and poststructural approaches part company in relation to their emphasis on the 'crisis of representation' and their resulting knowledge claims. And since the epistemological claims I make in the thinking with Bourdieu chapter are poststructural – that is I present them as materially and discursively grounded interpretations of events and trajectories - I see no conflict. Or at least no special conflict that would render my use of Bourdieu theoretically weak or inconsistent.

*Focus on predictability and reproduction*

In 'Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative' (1997), Judith Butler works with Bourdieu's theory to explore issues of knowledge and embodiment. She describes it as offering 'a promising account of the way in which non-intentional and non-deliberate incorporation of norms takes place' (p.142). She also identifies limitations in Bourdieu's 'conservative account' which:

> fails to consider the crisis in convention that speaking the unspeakable produces, the insurrectionary "force" of censored speech as it emerges into "official discourse" and opens the performative to an unpredictable future. (ibid)

As already stated, Bourdieu is a theorist of social reproduction. His is an ethical project as much as a theoretical one and it is a position with which I have much sympathy. The patterns of social reality are sticky. If I did not accept this I would have no interest in those of us who *appear* to have become unstuck. Several elements of Bourdieu's theory (which I discuss in

more detail in chapter 8) leave room for the possibility of change and reconfigurations, both for individuals and society, e.g. the concepts of 'hysteresis' and the 'cleft habitus'. His main concern, however, was the predictable reproduction of unjust social structures (which is a matter of probability, not pre-determination) through mechanisms at odds with dominant narratives of the self-made, the feckless poor and the fate-escaping brightest and best. And whilst I find Butler's queer, queering theory exciting and hopeful, it is precisely Bourdieu's emphasis on reproduction that ultimately influenced my decision to think with his theory rather than a poststructurally positioned alternative: its deconstructive capacity to explore our exceptional educational trajectories without the need for exceptional individual narratives undermines meritocratic notions of essential ability and worthiness.

*Use of Bourdieu by other poststructurally inclined writer-researchers*

Judith Butler is not the only poststructurally positioned writer-researcher to fruitfully engage with Bourdieu's theories. Couzens Hoy's 'Critial Resistance: From Poststructuralism to Post-Critique' (2005) has a chapter on Bourdieu's notion of the agent. The chapter begins with an acknowledgement that Bourdieu 'stands in a lineage' (p. 101) closer to Merleau-Ponty and Marx than Nietzsche (without whose influence poststructuralism would be 'unimaginable'[5] (p.19)). Despite this, Foucault and Bourdieu, he argues, can 'profitably be put on the same spectrum insofar as Bourdieu can be read as deepening Foucault's account of how subjectivity is constructed through power relations by providing a more detailed sociological theory of this process' (p.101). Hannah Botsis's 'Subjectivity, language and the postcolonial: Beyond Bourdieu in South Africa' (2017) takes a similar approach in that she acknowledges the differences and tensions between

[5] Couzens-Hoy also acknowledges in true poststructuralist fashion that 'whether or not the poststructuralist reading of Nietzche is correct or not is, of course, a contested question' (2005, p. 19).

broadly poststructural (including postcolonial) and Bourdieusian theories before proceeding to use both in conjunction with one another to 'engage with theoretical questions that exist at the intersections of critical social psychology, sociolinguistics and the political economy of language' (p.10). Although my disciplinary focus is different to her's I am also interested in the advantages of thinking with theories generated within different philosophical paradigms. This is something I discuss in chapter 14 where I consider how a thinking with theory methodology has enabled me to make a contribution to knowledge. Although it is unusual for poststructurally positioned writer-researchers to work with Bourdieu's theory, I was encouraged to learn of three who have opted to do so fruitfully and sensibly.

And so, whilst I recognise the differences and tensions between Bourdieusian and poststructural approaches to research, I also see potential advantages in thinking about our surprising educational trajectories with Bourdieu. My thesis could not exist without insights, suggestions and provocations generated within other research paradigms, including those incorporated into the widening participation literature which tend to be rooted in the type of categorical thinking that post thinking works to undermine whilst acknowledging its usefulness. The most important thing, I concluded, is that I use a poststructural theoretical compass to orientate my work, including chapters 8 and 9 in which I use Bourdieu's onto-epistemological, deeply relational, yet non-poststructurally positioned theory to think about exceptions within exceptionally sticky contexts. I reflect on the impact of my decision to use Bourdieu in chapter 14.


*Figure 14: Shelfie, DAR, 2016*

## 7.5 Walter Benjamin and other absent presences

Walter Benjamin, 'a revolutionary critic of the philosophy of progress, a Marxist opponent of 'progressivism', a nostalgic who dreams of the future' (Löwy, 2005, p. 2), resists classification. As Hannah Arendt wrote of her friend, 'the trouble with everything Benjamin wrote was that it turned out to be sui generis' (Arendt, 1970/1999, p.9). Benjamin took his own life in 1940 after an unsuccessful attempt to flee Nazi dominated France. I discovered him through his essay on Brecht's concept of 'epic theatre' (1998) a year or so after I'd started work on this project. Drawn by his unusual style - direct, personal, poetic - I sought out other texts, both collections of his essays, aphorisms and autobiographical writing (e.g. Illuminations (1999a), One-Way Street (1979), Walter Benjamin's Archive (2015)) and those produced by other writers about him (e.g. Lather & Kitchens 2007, Löwy 2005, Taussig 2006, Gilloch 1996, Butler 2011). In the Benjamin I constructed through my reading I found a margin surfer, a contrarian, someone curious about the relationship between past and present, someone alive to the significance of the material and the spatial, a melancholic, a theologically sensitive misfit. In other words, someone with whom I could relate and connect.

In Benjamin's writing, particularly his notion of a 'fight for the oppressed past' (Thesis XVII, 1930/1999, p. 254), I detected a means of theorizing the

almost buried, almost forgotten past of a school no longer in existence. Benjamin was a critic of universal notions of history and the inevitability of progress, which he saw as tales of the victor or ruler, with all current rulers the heirs of those who came before them (Thesis VII, 1930/1999, p. 248). Alternative histories are thus supressed. Patti Lather described Benjamin's thinking as 'more about ruins and fragments than progress, triumph, monuments and mastery' (Lather & Kitchens 2007). Benjamin wrote:

> "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (Benjamin, 1930/1999, p. 248).

This spoke to me of the archived data that tells the official story of Blakelaw School: the Ofsted reports, league tables, the Fresh Start failing schools policy, parliamentary debates, Ministerial statements, and local and national print media reports. These sources collectively provide a neat narrative about 'one of the worst school's in Britain', a school that failed children and failed to respond adequately to governmental standard raising input. Other materials I had gathered and constructed hinted of an 'oppressed past' with the power to trouble this linear version of history.

For a period of time my reading was entirely focused on this 'peculiar Marxist' (Arendt, 1970/1999, p. 16). But I struggled to make a methodology. The very features that made his writing so enjoyable to engage with as a reader – its poetic, fragmented, muti-sourced, non-linear nature – made it difficult to work with in the production of a clearly expressed thesis. For me at least. And so I opted to take a different path, the one on which we both now stand, Reader.

With the exception of this section of writing and a mention in the chapter that sets out Barad's theory of intra-action (section 10.5), Benjamin is largely absent from my thesis, in the form of citations, at least. I have written in detail about him here because the impact of my 'conversations' with Benjamin over a period of months are woven into my thinking and my

emotional connection to this project. Derrida's take on absence and erasure is important here:

> "Previously, erasures and added words left a sort of scar on the paper or a visible image in the memory. There was a temporal resistance, a thickness in the duration of the erasure". (Derrida 2005, p.24)

Whilst this is not literally the case with a doctoral thesis produced on a laptop, the idea remains powerful. A finished doctoral thesis bears the traces of everything that didn't make the final cut. For example, I cannot disentangle my understanding of Benjamin's take on time and history from my understanding of Barad on the same. Both present the possibility, not of emancipation or liberation, but of redemption, a prospect I find attractive both intellectually, as a theology graduate, and emotionally, as a woman who is sensitive to the ghosts of the past. I doubt I would have connected with Barad's thinking in the same way had I not already encountered Benjamin.

A number of other academic writers and texts are similarly intangibly present within this thesis. Some I discovered too late in the day to incorporate into a methodology. Others always felt like 'influences' rather than the main event. I represent the writers and the bodies of literature they led me to, both of which left their mark on me, here in a selection of quotations.

…….

To study social life, one must confront the ghostly aspects of it.

*Avery Gordon, Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the sociological imagination 2008, p.7*

…….

Both urban and rural spaces are saturated with stories. Every day we pass through these spaces we work, walk, live, and breathe them. Moreover, they

are multi-textual and often highly politicized. Spectral traces of history ebb and flow in, through, and under the tide of contemporary life.

*Selina Springett, Going Deeper or Flatter: Connecting Deep Mapping, Flat Ontologies and the Democratizing of Knowledge, 2015*

…….

The deep map attempts to record and represent the grain and patina of place through juxtapositions and interpenetrations of the historical and the contemporary, the political and the poetic, the factual and the fictional, the discursive and the sensual; the conflation of oral testimony, anthology, memoir, biography, natural history and everything you might ever want to say about a place.

*Mike Pearson & Michael Shanks, Theater/archaeology 2001*

…….

We find it familiar to consider objects as useful or aesthetic, as necessities or vain indulgences. We are on less familiar ground when we consider objects as companions to our emotional lives or as provocations to thought. The notion of evocative objects brings together these two less familiar ideas, underscoring the inseparability of thought and feeling in our relationship to things. We think with the objects we love; we love the objects we think with."

*Sherry Turkle, Evocative Objects: Things we Think With, 2007*

…….

Queer maintains its hope for 'non-repetition' only insofar as it announces the persistence of the norms and values that make queer feelings queer in the first place.

*Sara Ahmed, The Cultural Politics of Emotion, 2014*

…….

We all like to think of ourselves as a standard, and I can see that it is genuinely difficult for the English middle class to suppose that the working class is not desperately anxious to become just like itself. I am afraid this must be unlearned.

*Raymond Williams, Culture and Society 1983*

…….

Deleuze and Guatarri are an absent presence of a different sort. In contrast to Benjamin, I have read very little of their work in the form of primary texts. This was not a deliberate strategy. Whilst interesting and influential in terms of their impact on many of the writers whom my work is in conversation their words and the version of them as people that I constructed from my reading never moved me, never drew me in. Their influence on my thinking no doubt exceeds that of which I am consciously aware. They are friends of my friends, guides of my guides. The conversations I have had with their ideas have been mediated through the writers that are visible in my thesis. Which is not to suggest that unmediated reading is possible, of course. All reading is diffractive in the sense that we read through lenses tinted with that which we have previously read and experienced. It's a matter of degree.

……

These theorists, these texts, these absent presences are part of my mental furniture. They shape my posture and my field of vision, regardless of whether you or I are able to see how.

### 7.6 The 'Others'

Many of the conversations of significance in the shaping and making of this thesis have taken place outside the academy and/or taken forms not usually cited in a doctoral thesis. They include popular books about ideas, novels,

songs, photographs, works of performance or visual art, theatre, websites, face-to-face and written conversations with people and 'stuff'. Here are some representations of a selection of them.

…….

Between us, my mam and I have 7 boxes of varying sizes, shoe to house-moving, filled with stuff relating to Blakelaw and Oxford: photos, letters, tickets, newspaper cuttings, lecture notes, essays, exam papers, school reports, identity cards, concert programmes, diaries, postcards and receipts. The boxes are neatly stored out of sight, under beds and in my ex-wife's loft. Or at least they used to be. The research process has transformed their contents from mementos into archives into artefacts into data. I do not treat this data, which is currently strewn across the floor of the room in which I now write, as 'evidence that speaks for itself'. I invite it to have a conversation with me. I'm ready to listen. I wasn't always. The material responds. And our conversations simultaneously disrupt and reinforce the version of my educational trajectory from Blakelaw to Oxford I've held onto up to this point. Here is an example.

*Figure 16: Snapshots - The walk back to college after my final exam*

*'The force of a photograph is that it keeps open to scrutiny instants which the normal flow of time immediately replaces'.*

*Sunsan Sontag, On Photography, 1977, p. 111*

~

These three snapshots were taken in the hour after my final undergraduate exam at Oxford University in June 1991. I used them for an MSc assignment on visual inquiry and asked my mam and the friend who took them to comment. My mam's response emphasised belonging:

> Loved your subfusc[6] photos. You were definitely part of the Oxford set in that one, and you deserved to be….Lovely to see you surrounded by your friends. Said it before and I'll say it again, Sooooo proud! Xxx

The friend who took the photos, the daughter of an Oxford don, stressed our shared connection to a particular time and place:

> Strangely, I think you look a bit like me in that photo. I almost thought it was a pic of me being 'got' after Finals. Perhaps it is the uniform effect of subfusc or something….. Your end of Finals and mine are very linked in mind….. There were worries and anxieties, and Finals encapsulates the worries in a BIG WAY, but I see care-free happiness, youth, and potential in these pictures.

Their responses encouraged me to look closer. Do you see that I am wearing a red carnation? It's traditional but not mandatory to wear one on the last day of your exams. I clearly had friends who came to meet me and record the event. And my posture in the final photo suggests that I am quite comfortable walking through the streets of Oxford covered in flour and drinking sparkling wine from the bottle, also traditional and acceptable behaviours for 'students like me' on the last day of their exams. If I think about these snapshots and readings through a Bourdieusian lens I notice that my 'habitus' seems to have adapted to the 'field' in which I am positioned. Through a Foucauldian lens, I notice that the content of the snapshots and their very existence does not suggest resistance to an Oxford undergraduate subject positioning. And through a Baradian lens I notice how clothing, wine, flour, cobbles, old walls, bodies, discourses and practice intra-act to produce a meaningful moment in which I am present as an Oxford undergraduate. If you are unfamiliar with the thinking of Bourdieu, Foucault and Barad my observations will hopefully come to make more sense

[6] Subfusc is the name for the clothing that must be worn by students sitting exams under university regulations: http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/statutes/regulations/48-012.shtml

in time. These readings do not erase my memories of unhappiness, of feeling lost, of not fitting in. But they do disrupt a linear narrative that anchors me to a 'miserable misfit' position for the duration of my studies. My willingness to allow myself to be 'undone' by conversations with and about artefacts is one of the conditions of possibility within which my doctoral project became thinkable and doable.

…….

I read Walter Benjamin's essay on Brecht (1998) ahead of a performance of Mother Courage staged by Welsh National Theatre in Merthyr Tydfil Labour Club. The all-women production employed a number of Brechtian 'epic theatre' devices: actors played multiple parts; a woman in her 60s was cast as Courage's teenage daughter; her cart was a supermarket trolley; actors mingled, as actors, not characters, with the audience during the intermission. Epic theatre works to remind the audience of the constructed nature of the world depicted on stage so that they might consider how life outside the theatre is also constructed. In the words of Benjamin, 'it can happen this way, but it can also happen quite a different way' (Benjamin 1998, p.8).

The performance brought to mind the attempts of poststructural researchers to disrupt their own texts as a gesture towards the crisis of representation (e.g. Lather, 2007). It wasn't the first time I'd met Brecht (through productions of his plays) but on that evening he and those involved in the staging of his play made me think about the potential political force of a method that encourages the reader to question everything in the text before them and imagine how differently in could have been.

…….

I met the dancer/artist Marega Palser at a party on the last day of 2017. We found ourselves in conversation about a methodology called deep mapping. Marega was the first person I'd met (anywhere, not just at a New Year party)

who was familiar with deep mapping, an approach I would have considered using had I not discovered it too late in the day. The conversation we had that evening continued as we walked and talked in city edgelands and shared ideas, quotations and links to music and images via email. The images I send to her are usually snapshots of things I see and consider interesting and/or beautiful while I'm out and about and pictures of my staffie. Marega sends me photos and images of her artwork. None of them were produced for the thesis but I have included a number (with Marega's permission) that express something at the heart of what I am attempting to do.

…….

Talking Heads became my favourite band in 1986 when I was 17 years old. I'm 49 now and they still are, even though their last record was released in 1988 and they officially ceased to exist in 1991. I recall listening to the band's album Fear of Music (1979) repeatedly during my second year at Oxford. I was quite lost that year. Fear of Music didn't provide any answers but it did legitimize my questions. The narrator of the songs looks in from somewhere else observing the world around him. Through his eyes, familiar things – air, paper, language - seem strange and potentially dangerous. My familiarity and love of Talking Heads' back catalogue, is, I think, one of the reasons I am able to stand on poststructural ground without feeling that I am about to fall over.

…….

Here are a few more examples of non-academic texts and those produced in a form not usually included in literature reviews with which my thesis is in conversation: www.brainpickings.org, Maria Popova's take on the world through the lens of other writers, artists, thinkers and makers; the Manchester Metropolitan University Summer Institute in Qualitative Research, 2015 and 2017; the University of Illinois Twelfth International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, 2016; Willful Blindness: Why we Ignore the Obvious at our Peril by Margaret Heffernan (2011); email conversations with Patti Lather

and Geoff Bright, both academics I admired and so contacted to run some ideas by in the early days; Why be Happy when you could be Normal? By Jeanette Winterson (2011).

## 7.7 Everything Connects

When held together in mind, the 'texts' and encounters with whom this thesis is in conversation produce a map of sorts. It's not to scale. Vast areas are sometimes represented by a paragraph or a single image. Small details are sometimes represented elaborately across several pages through images, theoretical musings and the quoted words of the people. I hope I've given you a sufficiently clear and detailed legend to navigate the territory.

I'm not an expert in anything. Maybe the music of Talking Heads, though that's debatable. My magpie tendencies work against expertise. I am quite good at making connections, sometimes disappointingly so. For example, I like to think that I have broad taste in music. I'll discover some new music that's 'unlike anything I've ever heard before'. But I'll later find out that the guitarist has previously collaborated with a singer-songwriter I've loved for decades. Or that my new favourite band is from the same city as 3 of my old favourite bands. Or that four seemingly diverse artists all cite Nina Simone as an influence. So it should have come as no surprise when I discovered that several of my favourite poststructurally inclined writers have, like me, a fascination with Walter Benjamin. Or that a dancer and artist I met at a new year party had recently been in correspondence with the academic whose writing introduced me to the concept of deep mapping (Biggs, 2010). Or that the academic involved in the strange Barad inspired performance at the Summer Institute in Qualitative Research (Bright, Whiteley and Shaw, 2017) turned out to be the same academic who introduced me to Avery Gordon and the notion of a social haunting in more conventional but equally fascinating performance of academic engagement at the same event two years previously (Bright, 2013). If you are interested in relationships and time and language and matter then everything connects. Eventually.

*Figure 17: Deconstructed bike, DAR, 2016*

# PART TWO

# Chapter 8

# Bourdieu's Theoretical Triad: Habitus, Field and Capital

*"I could have been someone."*

*"Well so could anyone."*

Fairytale of New York, Jem Finer and Shane MacGowan, (Finer and MacGowan, 1987)

## 8.1 Purpose of the chapter

This chapter aims to provide an understanding of Bourdieu's mutually generating thinking tools which I will put to work in the next chapter. In 8.2 I provide an overview of habitus, field and capital. In 8.3. I explain how the onto-epistemological nature of Bourdieu's thinking emphasises the durable, 'sticky' nature of social reproduction whilst creating a theoretical space for the possibility of deviation. In 8.4 I show how this deeply relational thinking results in a conceptualisation of an agent, or subject, who is neither/both free *and* confined. And in 8.5 I set out some concepts and conceptualisations associated with Bourdieu's theoretical triad that I used in my thinking, analysis and writing in chapter 9.

## 8.2 Overview of habitus, field and capital

Pierre Bourdieu was a French sociologist who aimed to account for the existence and reproduction of patterns of social inequalities. Like Foucault, he emphasised the durable, sticky nature of the mechanisms that maintain the social status quo whilst also providing a theoretical space for the possibility of less predictable outcomes. Like Foucault and Barad, he was a deeply relational, highly contextual, non-essentialist thinker. His concepts, or 'thinking tools' (Wacquant and Bourdieu, 1989, p. 50), of habitus, field and capital are mutually generating in the sense that none of them are 'primary, dominant or causal' (Thompson, 2008, p. 69). It's impossible to think fruitfully without all three.

### *Habitus*

Bourdieu used the term habitus to describe the ways in which we see, feel and act in the world. It is 'a habitual state (especially of the body) [….], a predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination' (Bourdieu 1977, p.214). It is shaped within the overlapping environmental and cultural conditions of our lives, for example, in relation to family, social class, religion, gender roles and the rural or urban setting of our upbringing. In this sense a

person, or 'agent' to use Bourdieu's preferred term, is 'the individual trace of an entire collective history' (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 91). Habitus is embodied, expressing itself in posture, movement, gesture and expression as well as framing our thinking about the world and ourselves. Observe the gait of a young Etonian and a boy of the same age, height and build raised on an inner-city social housing estate: chances are, they will walk quite differently to one another but similarly to their peers. The habitus, 'embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history' (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 56) functions 'below the level of consciousness' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 468). As a result, our way of *being* in the world is experienced as natural, neutral, normal: walking the 'correct' way so as to ensure you fit in does not require any conscious effort.

*Field*

The field is the social space in which agents are positioned and interact, using strategies (largely unconsciously) to maintain or improve their position by gaining capital. The social world is made up of multiple fields, e.g: finance, politics, culture and education, which includes the sub-fields of academia and schooling (e.g. see Bourdieu 1996; Bourdieu & Wacquant 1993; Bourdieu 1988). Whilst the rules of engagement vary across different fields, there is a degree of over-lap and the rules of the economic field reach into the others: the capacity to earn a lot of money in a high-status job, for example, is seen to be an outcome of what is considered to be a 'good education' within the field of education.

*Capital*

Bourdieu posited that capital takes 'three fundamental guises' (1986, p.248): economic capital; social capital (who you (are seen to) know) and cultural capital (what you (are seen to) know). Cultural and social capital function as 'symbolic capital' in that they are 'recognized as legitimate competence, as authority' (Bourdieu, 1986) and both are convertible, under certain conditions, to economic capital. Different forms of capital emerge in

different fields where the value of similar types of capital is variable. For example, within the field of academia, the accumulation of qualifications is equated with the possession of intelligence, talent and commitment which is rewarded in the form of job appointments that produce economic capital: a PhD within the sub-field of professional football is unlikely to yield many benefits, economic or otherwise. As with economic capital, where having money produces opportunities to make more money, agents in possession of social and cultural capital relevant to the field in which they are operating are likely to be presented with further opportunities to 'network' and take part in 'culturally rewarding' activities.

Bourdieu used a sporting metaphor to explain the relationship between his concepts. The field can be seen as the game itself, including the rules and the pitch on which it is played. The game has meaning and makes sense within this space but not necessarily beyond these boundaries: you can score points whilst holding the ball in rugby union but you'd be penalised for the same action in football. The habitus is a 'kind of practical sense for what is to be done in a given situation - what is called in sport a "feel" for the game' (Bourdieu, 1998a, p. 25). The habitus does not rely on a conscious mastery of the game: a footballer about to take a free kick can have a 'feel' for what we call velocity, position, acceleration, geometry and probability without grasping any of these concepts consciously using scientific terminology.

At stake is an accumulation of different types of capital, which from a sporting perspective, includes the prizes, recognition, wages and other rewards bestowed upon those who excel. Not everyone has an equal chance of winning. Whilst luck plays its part, this is not a game of chance. It is a competition. Nor is success simply a matter of individual effort. Lots of factors influence the likelihood that a person will triumph, fail or put in an average performance including opportunities for practice, self-belief, the support of others, access to coaching and good nutrition, all of which are largely determined by the cultural, social and economic capital one has previously accumulated.

Bourdieu's sporting metaphor took on an embodied quality for me last year when, at the age of 48, I joined an established group of women in their 40s and 50s to play five-a-side football for fun and fitness once a week. I had no previous experience and hadn't played a team sport of any type in over three decades. The friend who invited me to join the five-a-side team – I would never have dreamed of joining the group had I not been invited - reassured me that I'd get up to speed in no time, that I was one of the fittest in the group, that the rules of play were straight-forward. She was right in part. I run and lift weights so my stamina, strength and speed are above average for a woman of my age. It is also true that the rules of five-a-side football are relatively straight-forward and I am good at listening and taking instructions when it comes to technical activities, both helpful dispositions in this context. The problem, I soon discovered, is that five-a-side football is not a simple technical activity. Most of the women I play with are former club and Welsh international footballers and many of them are still involved in the game in a coaching and/or spectating capacity. Decades of experience have given them a spatial awareness of the pitch, sound judgement about the timing of a pass, an ability to control the ball and to 'create space' to enable their teammates to shoot at goal, and a fluency in the jargon used to communicate during a game - Time!, Bring it!, Squeeze!. My ability to outrun most of them was largely irrelevant when I started playing since it rarely resulted in me or anyone else on my team scoring a goal. As capital, it did not count for much, given my lack of feel for the game. I can see in others the ease with which they read a situation and respond within a fraction of a second with a practical mastery that 'does not contain the knowledge of its own principles' (Nicholas of Cusa in Couzens Hoy 2005, p.115) but I can't emulate it. The experience reminded me of my early days in Oxford when I could see how awkward, how mismatched, how 'incorrect' my movements, my dress, my voice, my words were but could do nothing about it. The simplicity of formal rules within a game, sporting or otherwise, serves to inflate the value of a habitus that incorporates a feel for that game on a deep, embodied level.

I persevered at five-a-side football and I have improved. This is partly a result of my willingness to ask questions, take instruction and capitalise on my fitness: speed and stamina do become relevant once you are able to kick a ball at a target or pass to someone who can. But I probably wouldn't have hung around to let time play its part had the other players in 'the field' been less welcoming. The accomplished women I play with are friendly and encouraging. They are motivated to bring others into the game they love. As Bourdieu points out, this is not a common dynamic in the world of social power relations where we are more likely to find:

> a struggle, [….] between the newcomer who tries to break through the entry barrier and the dominant agent who will try to defend the monopoly and keep out competition. (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 72).

Bourdieu also described the field in terms of a battlefield, 'a space of conflict and competition' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 17). It is hard to prosper within a field into which one was not born and has no inheritance. Hard, but not impossible.

### 8.3 Context is all

It is impossible to think analytically with capital, field or habitus individually since all three concepts work in relation to one another. For example, the value of different types of capital, and indeed what counts as capital at all, is contingent upon the characteristics of the field and the 'match' between the field and a person's habitus. A good match means a person will have a good sense of the game and profit from that:

> Some habitus (those of dominant social and cultural factions) act as multipliers of various kinds of capital, and in fact constitute a form of capital (symbolic) in and of themselves'. (Harker, Mahar and Wilkes, 1990, p. 12)

The educational field in which our schooling played out was constituted by a number of interacting and overlapping conditions including, on a macro

level, educational and social discourse and global and UK economic conditions and, on a micro level, particular manifestations of violence. For pupils at Blakelaw in the 1980s and 1990s, a good 'feel for the game' would have required a habitus equipped to deal effectively with specific violent conditions as well as one predisposed to behaviours associated with being a 'good pupil'. And since the conditions of the field in an elite university are different to those at play in an inner-city school in a 'disadvantaged' area, it follows that a habitus well-suited to one environment would not necessarily generate capital in another. A person's ability to gain capital and establish a good position in a new field will depend, in part, on the adaptability of their habitus.

### 8.4 The Bourdieusian agent

Bourdieu's onto-epistemological, highly contextual take on social relations dismantles the binaries of agency and structure, subjectivity and objectivity. The Bourdiesian agent is not an automaton, but nor do they necessarily know *why* they do what they do. Going to university is a given for some young people whilst it never dents the consciousness of others and therefore never manifests as an option. A young person's 'decision' to apply to university reflects both their habitus and the structures of the social world they inhabit including the 'doxa' (that which is unquestioningly accepted as common sense) regarding the desirability, pointlessness, feasibility or otherwise of higher education.

> As a matter of fact, social agents, students choosing an educational track or discipline, families choosing an institution for their children, and so on, are not particles subject to mechanical forces and acting under the constraint of causes; nor are they conscious and knowing subjects acting with full knowledge of the facts, as the champions of rational action theory believe. [.....] In fact, "subjects" are active and knowing agents endowed with a practical sense, that is, an acquired system of preferences, of principles of vision and division (what is usually called taste), and also a system of durable cognitive structures

> (which are essentially the product of the internalization of objective structures) and of schemes of action which orient the perception of the situation and the appropriate response. (Bourdieu, 1998a, pp. 24–25)

The Bourdieusian 'agent' is more akin to the situated Foucauldian subject created in a web of power relations than the conscious, Cartesian subject who employs agency to rationally achieve their aims. For Bourdieu, what we conceptualise as the objective (socially structured) and subjective (individual) dimensions of the social world are 'simultaneously constructed' (Lucas, 2006, p. 56). The way rich and poor boys walk reflects the context of their upbringing as much as the length of their legs and sense of self because:

> the body is in the social world but the social world is also in the body. (Bourdieu 1990, p.190)

The path is predictable but not inevitable. Chance and time are ingredients in the constellation of conditions that make deviation a possibility, as Bourdieu scholar Derek Robbins explains here:

> Individuals in different situations have different capacities to generate positions, but all individuals possess some capacity for positional change. The extent to which this capacity is actualised depends on random encounters with other individuals and groups, such that social trajectories can never be fully calculated or predicted by detached observers. (2000, p.31)

Within the context of our school days these chance encounters might take the form of interactions with people, groups, institutions and cultures usually located outside the 'universe' of our working class, urban existence. Over time, new experiences, including chance encounters, have an impact.

> Habitus is not the fate that some people read into it. Being the product of history, it is an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in

a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures. It is durable but not eternal! (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 133).

## 8.5 Concepts and conceptualisations of particular interest

The following concepts and conceptualisations associated with the field, habitus and capital have, for me, a particular resonance with the accounts and other materials I gathered.

*The taste of necessity*

Bourdieu talked about the taste of necessity in relation to the way our aspirations and tastes reflect the "concrete indices of the accessible and the inaccessible, of what is and is not 'for us'" (Bourdieu 1993, p.64; see also 1984, p.173). Most people from low socio-economic backgrounds do not go on to gain access to, and perform well at, top rated universities. From a Bourdieusian perspective, the 'concrete' indices which make this path inaccessible relate to a lack of economic, social and cultural capital – there is no money for private schools or extra tuition and our parents and their friends are not in a position to help us with our A Level homework or provide us with work experience placements. We tend to inherit the family 'taste of necessity', that often unspoken, taken for granted sense of what constitutes a feasible future for 'people like us'. It is reinforced by 'non-conscious, unwilled strategies for avoiding the perception of other possibilities' (Couzens Hoy, 2005, p. 120) which have a restricting effect since in order to enter a field a person needs 'not only the right of entry but also the desire to do so' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1993, p. 21).

*Hysteresis and cleft habitus*

Bourdieu worked to account for the durability and reproduction of social relations but he was also mindful of the dynamism of the social world. Things are always moving in the field:

> Social fields are universes where things continually move and are never completely predetermined. (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p. 199)

The same is true of the habitus which,

> as a product of social conditionings, and thus of a history (unlike character), is endlessly transformed. (Bourdieu 1990, p.116)

Hysteresis describes the dislocation between a habitus and field that occurs as a result of changes in field conditions.

> The presence of the past in this kind of false anticipation of the future performed by habitus is, paradoxically, most clearly seen when the sense of a probable future is belied and, when dispositions ill-adjusted to the objective chances because of a hysteresis effect [.....] are negatively sanctioned because the environment they encounter is too different from the one to which they are objectively adjusted. (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 62)

In other words, hysteresis is what happens when a person's dispositions, strategies and 'feel for the game', once well matched to the way of the(ir) world, no longer work as a means of safeguarding or improving social position (Bourdieu 1999).

Since the concept of hysteresis is rooted in notions of change and transformation, it follows that some habitus will eventually adapt to the new conditions in the field, though, as Bourdieu points out, those already rich in capital are more likely to be in a position to operationalise opportunities:

> In a general manner, it is the people who are richest in economic capital, cultural capital and social capital who are the first to head for new positions (Bourdieu, The Rules of Art 1996, p. 262 in Hardy 2008, p.135)

Bourdieu used the concept of cleft habitus to describe the uncomfortable effects of his own social mobility as follows:

> This dual experience could only compound the durable effect of a very strong discrepancy between high academic consecration and low social origin, in other words a cleft habitus, inhabited by tensions and contradictions. This kind of 'coincidence of contraries' no doubt helped to institute in a lasting way, an ambivalent, contradictory relationship to the academic institution, combining rebellion and submission, rupture and expectation, which is perhaps at the root of a relation to myself that is also ambivalent and contradictory - as if the self-certainty linked to the feeling of being consecrated were undermined in its very principle by the most radical uncertainty towards the consecrating institution, a kind of bad mother, vain and deceiving. (Bourdieu, 2008, p. 100):

Bourdieu wrote little about the cleft habitus, perhaps because he was less interested in exceptions than he was in the implications of the durability of the habitus for the many.

*The body*

With the exception of some focus on disability, the body receives very little focus in the widening participation literature whereas the body is central to Bourdieu's thinking. Habitus is an embodied concept, effecting how we move, act, live, and appear to be, which in turn impacts on our ability to gain access to and prosper within certain fields. We inherit our bodies from our parents, both in terms of our habitus and its physical capacity – it's size, strength, functioning. I am interested in the relevance of bodies to the habitus, its match with the field and its capacity to help us make social and cultural capital.

# Chapter 9

# Thinking with Bourdieu's Habitus, Field and Capital

*I think that I could create two intellectual biographies for myself that were completely different—one which made all my successive choices appear to be the product of a project directed in a methodical way, since the beginning; the other, also completely accurate, that described a chain of chance, of more or less fortuitous encounters, happy or unhappy.*

Interview between Pierre Bourdieu and Yvette Delsaut (2002) in Reed-Delany 2005, p.22

## 9.1 Purpose of the chapter

This chapter uses Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus and capital and related ideas to explore some of the ways in which complex relationships between people, things and context can be understood to produce the conditions of possibility under which going to university became feasible for my contributors and myself. In 9.2 I talk about my hesitant desire to write about violence and my use of the concept of 'field' to do so. In 9.3 I consider the ways in which the habitus as it relates to the negotiation of violence may have facilitated or hindered access to university for three of my contributors. In 9.4 I consider the ways in which chance encounters played a role in facilitating our educational journeys and in 9.5 I consider the impact of the 'taste for necessity' on our educational journeys. In 9.6 I consider ways in which the notions of a 'right of entry' and 'desire to do so' can be understood to facilitate or impede a person's entry into a field into which they were not born. Finally, in 9.7 I reflect on the analytical insights produced by my thinking with Bourdieu in this chapter.

I used the following question to guide my thinking in this chapter:

> *How does Bourdieu's theoretical triad facilitate an exploration of exceptions to predicted educational trajectories without need for exceptional individual narratives?*

## 9.2 Thinking about violence with 'the field'

The subject of physical violence was present in many of the conversations I had with my contributors. It initially featured in responses to my email request for three vivid memories and reflections on why they thought they'd made it to university when most of their peers had not. The negotiation of 'physical violence' is not a prominent feature in the widening participation literature. When it is addressed it is presented as a negative force, as this quote from a recent systematic review of factors linked to 'poor academic

performance of disadvantaged students in science and maths in schools' illustrates:

> Experiencing and exhibiting aggression and violence is strongly associated with lower socio-economic status. These undesirable behavioural patterns are highly and disproportionately prevalent among school-aged urban minority youth. Basch (2011) highlights causal pathways through which aggression and violence slow down learning include affected cognition, lack of school connectedness and absenteeism. Disruptive classroom behaviour is a well-recognised and significant barrier to teaching and learning. (Banerjee, 2016, p. 4)

Struck by my contributors' more nuanced accounts of their experience of violence and its impact on their education, I asked them about it directly when we met in person. It became clear that we all agreed that physical violence, or the threat of it, formed part of the landscape of our daily lives during our time at Blakelaw. Our reflections on its impact on our educational journey were, in contrast, diverse.

I felt compelled to write openly and unflinchingly about this collective aspect of our experience as Blakelaw pupils. I wanted to provoke a thoughtful, deconstructive, curious response. But I worried that my portrayal of my contributors, our school and, by association, the poor working classes of the West End of Newcastle, might evoke feelings of disdain, pity, concern or disgust. I discussed my ambivalence with Sara and her mam. They agreed that violence was a significant component of the Blakelaw experience but were also keen that I avoid writing in such a way as to invite judgement. Our reticence, I believe, was not an indication of shame or an expression of defensive working-class Geordie tribalism but a reflection of our resentment and frustration at having previously been positioned by proxy, as people associated with Blakelaw school and the neighbourhood in which it was located, as 'hooligans' or the 'pitiful disadvantaged'. Whilst accepting that I do not have control over your response, Reader, I am satisfied that Bourdieu's thinking tools enable me to undramatically theorise the

significance of violence as one of the conditions of possibility in which our educational trajectories unfolded.

*Thinking with 'the field'*

The field in which the educational trajectories of my contributors and myself took form and played out was constituted by a number of interacting and overlapping global, UK and local conditions. Some elements of the field were in a state of flux as successive Conservative and Labour administrations carried through a range of reforms. The Education Reform Act 1988, Education (Schools) Act 1992 and Education Act 1993 introduced a number of mechanisms purportedly designed to raise standards including the establishment of the schools inspection body Ofsted, the publishing of performance league tables and the granting of parental choice. The value of the student maintenance grants dropped annually from the late 80s (Bolton 2018, page 3). They were abolished in England in 1998 and replaced with income-assessed student loans which had first been introduced in 1990/91. Students became liable for tuition fees in 1998. And the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 abolished the distinction between polytechnics and universities which almost doubled the number of universities in the UK. In 1990 77,163 students obtained a first degree. By 2000 that figure had risen to 243,346 (Bolton, 2012). And in 2015, my brother David was one of 395,580 students who obtained a first degree.

Other conditions in the field had been stable for some time, e.g. the low socioeconomic status of the area and its susceptibility to the impact of recession and deindustrialization. Physical violence can be seen as a consistent and significant local component of the field on which our education played out. The recollections of my contributors represented below conjure up a sense in which violence was at once normal, disruptive, funny, frightening, empowering and, crucially, unavoidable in that it had to be negotiated in one way or another.

…….

Violence was an everyday occurrence in Blakelaw. In the words of Alan:

> It was normal. I would say at Blakelaw I saw violence on a weekly basis. Examples? I have seen a kid punch a teacher. I've seen a teacher lose the plot with a kid. I've seen a teacher in the sixth form have a bit of a beef with a kid and have a game of football and go through this kid like a locomotive train on the football pitch and get up and go, that was for last week. I imagine that would be in the news these days. And honestly, weekly, multiple girls pulling each other's hair, boys scrapping.

When I asked David if anyone ever hit him when we were in school, he laughed because this is such a ridiculous question:

> Ah, yeah, of course! But I was never targeted. Ever. So when people ask if I was bullied at Blakelaw I always say no because I didn't get it any worse than anyone else. It would just be that very occasionally a horrible loud trouble maker, like Micky D, do you remember him? He looked like a little monkey. Literally. The form of it would be that I'd have to sit next to an idiot and getting punched in the arm. But there'd be nothing after that. No one ever took money off me. It was random.

In the early days, he recalled, violence was a means of 'sussing out who's who':

> There were one or two quiet kids at the beginning and one of the loud, hard kids tried to bully them a little bit and they got flattened by the quiet kid. Cos there were some quiet kids there who weren't bullies or trouble-makers but it was discovered that they could look after themselves. I really respected those people. I knew a few people like that.

Sara told me that she has vivid memories of teachers being hit by both pupils and parents. On one occasion she witnessed a pupil's father 'absolutely kicking the shit' out of a P.E. teacher while she and her class

mates where playing tennis. ‘He had a black eye and everything. I don’t know what it was about but he was really severely beaten up.’

We can all remember incidents involved the throwing of objects – blackboard rubbers, chairs, books. David told me about an incident triggered by a teacher locking the classroom door when a girl asked to go to the toilet:

> So she picked a chair up and threw it through the window. Smashed it. The frame came out and everything. The chair out into the yard, everything. And I think she shouted something like, “I’m on my period”. There was some mention of her period. And we were all quiet. Nobody even took the mick or sneered or laughed or giggled like you might expect of lads at that age. And he unlocked the door for her in a hurry.

We can all recall incidents in which pupils were on the receiving end of the violence from teachers. David told me about an incident that began with a boy shouting an insult at a teacher across the playground before lessons started. Later in the day the teacher came into the boy’s classroom and pulled him into the corridor by the hair:

> We didn't see what happened in the corridor but he came back with a very red cheek. His hair was absolutely all over the place and he had a small cut on his hand. He sat down and our own teacher said nothing and continued with the class. He was rubbing his hand and sucking the blood out of the cut on his hand for the rest of the lesson but said nothing.

I asked my contributors what the upshot of the many incidents they reported. ‘Nobody complained if you mean that’, said David. ‘There were never complaints as far as I’m aware’.

None of us recall any serious consequences. This was David’s view on the hair-grabbing incident:

> I don't think he would ever have told that to his mam and dad. It was a different mindset. That lad wasn't victimised by that incident. You could see he was in shock, quiet. But other than that it was a badge of honour. To be physically twatted one by a teacher.

Violence was normal. And the normality was not confined within the school gates. In Sara's words:

> It was part of our life outside of school as well. It was part of my life. You couldn't not respond. If someone looked at you and you let it slide that was seen as weakness. So you had to say, 'have you got a problem?'. You had to constantly be like that and it was like that in and outside of school. And the teachers developed their own mechanisms for dealing with that.

Sara's mam expressed a similar view:

> It was part of life. When people say you have to fight for everything, sometimes you literally have to fight.

In addition to the prolific nature of our accounts - there were many more which I haven't included in this chapter - I was also struck by the humorous nature of some of the retellings. On the train back to Cardiff after meeting Sara I listened to a recording of our conversation and had to turn the volume down at one point because the sound of our laughter hurt my ears. I also noticed the affection with which some incidents were remembered. Like this one shared by Mr. J, the former teacher (the underlining emphasis is his own):

> You know how problematical some of the kids could be and yet they were <u>so</u> loyal. I remember one day when a gang of kids from Kenton [a neighbouring school] came up at lunchtime looking for trouble. I was on the school yard on duty by myself and confronted them telling them to get off the premises. Some of the ringleaders were starting to circle me like vultures. Within minutes I was surrounded by Blakelaw

> kids and they backed off and left. I will never forget that display of loyalty on their behalf, and some of them had the biggest behaviour problems!!

Sara told this account of an incident in which a teacher held her by the neck against a wall. That sounds traumatic, doesn't it? But in fact it was her telling of this story that caused us both to laugh so loudly I had to turn down the volume when I later listened to the recording:

> I had an anti-nazi league t-shirt on and a teacher came up and picked me up by the neck and he held me up against the wall because he thought I had a nazi t-shirt on. Then he realised and went 'ah, you're alright. I thought that said Nazi'. And I thought, good for you! Yes, good! You should grab someone by the neck for having a nazi t-shirt on. It was great.

## 9.3 Navigating the field: thinking with habitus and capital

From a Bourdieusian perspective, doing well in school requires a habitus well matched to the conditions in the field. For pupils at Blakelaw in the 1980s and 1990s such a habitus would have: enabled a person to deal effectively with the impact of economic hardship and associated discourses around the deserving and undeserving poor; been predisposed to behaviours associated with being a 'good pupil'; had the capacity to adapt to changing conditions within the field of higher education including the phasing out of maintenance grants; and equipped a person to successfully navigate various forms of physical violence. Here I look at the recollections of three of my contributors through a Bourdieusian lens to explore the 'fit' between their habitus and violent conditions within the field.

*Sara*

You'll remember that Sara identified her status as the 'hardest girl in the school' as possibly relevant to her surprising educational trajectory. Her description of herself jumped out for two reasons. Firstly, I'd never come

across anything in the academic literature that suggested that being 'hard' – good at fighting – might be a facilitating factor for educational performance and participation. Secondly, though poststructurally inclined, I have also existed for 40 odd years in a world drenched in categories, hierarchies and types: 'hard girls' and 'swots' are mutually exclusive categories, aren't they?

When we meet up in person, I tell Sara that in addition to wondering how I ended up on an educational trajectory that took in Blakelaw Comprehensive, Oxford University and a funded doctoral place at Bristol University, I have also marvelled at the fact I was never bullied in school. Sara's story goes way beyond an avoidance of bullying and it fascinates me. So I ask her to tell me more.

> So, my dad was a PTI – a physical training instructor - and he was in charge of arm-to-arm combat in the forces. And… [she pauses here, then continues slowly] my dad…was…. a radgie.

> Radgie: Noun (Geordie and Scotland, pejorative)
>
> A violent or aggressive person or someone who throws temper tantrums.

We both laugh heartily. I love this word and haven't heard it used in decades. Sara rolls her eyes and shakes her head signalling, I think, love and exasperation. She has already told me a little of her loving, politically alive family background. That her mam told her to speak truth to power. That her dad was black-listed for trade union activity in the 80s and bought himself out of the army after witnessing things he wasn't comfortable with whilst on tour in Northern Ireland. He is a man who questions everything, she tells me. When she says her dad was a radgie I know that she is not telling me that he was violent within the context of the family.

She continues:

My dad was a tough man from Benwell. No one would look at him. He was a bodybuilder…

Was he known as someone not to be messed with?, I ask.

Oh, yeah. If anyone looked at him the wrong way he would head butt them. He still would now! I say dad, you're in your 60s. You can't go about doing things like that. And he'll go, well, he looked at iz funny. Oh god…and you think, he's gonna get killed one of these days. And he used to really not know what to do with us as children so he'd take us in the garden and he'd show us how to use nunchucks[7] or whatever, you know, 'this is what to do if someone comes at you with a knife'. And I used to get right into it. My brother couldn't be bothered!

We are laughing as I exclaim, 'what a brilliant training for going to Blakelaw School!'

Yes! And I'm only 5 foot 2 so you know, I could get away with it. I'm not a very threatening person. When I was younger I couldn't always articulate things. And my older brother was fostered. He's Chinese. And we got a lot of stick, a lot of racist abuse, shit through the door, lit paper through the door, all that. And I was angry. And I didn't know how to articulate that or have an argument in the way that I would now. So I was a chair thrower, probably. I would just kick off. And I didn't have that many fights at Blakelaw to be fair. I just was mouthy. If someone had a problem with me I'd say, have you got a problem?

But did she have fights? Physical fights?

Yes I did. I had a few fights. I think it was in the first year at school, I had a couple of fights with a couple of hard girls. And to be honest, I

[7] Nunchucks are a Japanese martial arts weapon consisting of two sticks connected at one end by a short chain or rope.

> think a lot of it was because I started my periods when I was 10 years old and I used to get really bad PMT. And in the first year at Blakelaw School there was a girl [from a well-known hard West End family]. And she gave me a bit of bother and I had PMT that day so I went, right, and just grabbed a hold of her and that was it. People said oh my god don't mess with her.

Recognising the surname of the girl in question – you'd think twice before getting into a fight with a girl from that family - I ask if there was any come back for Sara?

> No. Because they knew my dad was a radgie! So, I had a couple of fights and then you used to have to fight the hardest girl in Kenton on a Wednesday on the Blakelaw field. Because there was that rivalry. So every Wednesday when we finished early if you were the hardest girl you had to go and fight the hardest girl at Kenton. And it hardly ever happened. We'd all turn up on the field but they wouldn't so there'd be no one to fight. But I was willing to do it. I thought, well what are you going to do? I know how to use nunchucks!

'So you weren't physically frightened, your whole time in Blakelaw?' I ask. I can't imagine what that must have been like.

> No, no. And it was never like it is now. Some of the kids I work with now use knives, weapons. It was never that. It was like pulling people's hair. Literally, that was it.

We're laughing again.

> There was never a massive injury. But what it meant is that people left me alone. And I always remember at a parents evening one of the teachers saying to my parents, I think Sara does well because she can get on with anyone. She can get on with the oddballs, the charvas[8], the

[8] Charva is the Geordie version of the word 'chav'.

> hard kids, you know, I just got on with everyone. No one would give me a hard time. Whether that was because of fear or not, they just let me get on with it. So I was never called a swot or anything like that in the way some other kids were.

Being the hardest girl in school didn't just enable Sara to engage with classroom learning. It also allowed her to dress as she wanted. She tells me that when she was doing her GCSEs she wore Doctor Marten boots and t-shirts with political slogans on them. Dressing like that would have marked a person out as different when I was at school. I ask if the same was true for her:

> Oh, absolutely. Dreads and cornrows and DM boots and my Malcolm X t-shirt. I was prize material for being picked on. But no-one would dare say anything. Not because, like I said, I never had that many fights.

I tell Sara that I imagine having the reputation of being hard, not fearing for her safety, must have allowed her to put her mind elsewhere, like on her studies and on the issues of social injustice she cared so passionately about.

> Yes, yes, absolutely. That started in primary school because I had a few fights in primary school. So Blakelaw wasn't a massive shock to my system.

The transition from our small primary school to Blakelaw was a massive shock to the system for me and my brother David. It must have made a huge difference to have that kind of physical confidence from your very first day.

A few months later I meet Sara again, this time with her mam in the house she was brought up in, just a few minutes walk from the school. Her mam tells me that she has never been a violent person but that her husband came from a desperately poor background where he sometimes literally had to fight for things. She'd initially felt a bit uncomfortable about him teaching

the children how to defend themselves but it was a game and they enjoyed it and in the end Sara ended up using those skills. When I ask how she felt about Sara's reputation as the hardest girl in the school she tells me:

> I was pleased because I knew she was protecting herself. Not that she was going to be going round fighting everybody but the fact that no one would bother her. And I think you need to. It doesn't matter where you live. Blakelaw, Ponteland or Darras Hall [both 'posh' areas of Newcastle]. You need to be able to protect yourself.

Sara laughs and says to her mam:

> Yes, but you can't really employ those skills at the LSE though… "Do you know who I am?".

We all laugh. But I'm also mindful that Sara's time at the LSE was hard, painful at times. We talked about our experiences of the elite universities we went to last time we met. Sara told me that:

> the three years at the LSE were the hardest of my life. They were really difficult. Horrendous. Most people were from private school and would ask 'which school did you go to?' when you met. The other students were in suits. Gucci suits. I was in my jeans. Then there was all this, 'I can't understand what you're saying'. And obviously the first thing I did was get involved in the campaign for free education so I was known. And they used to have a weekly student newspaper and they'd write about me every week and they said I was a cross between Alan Shearer and a caveman. They used to write every week about my funny accent and stuff. I became so mad.

'Did you not want to chin them[9]?' I asked, feeling angry myself.

[9] To chin someone is the beat them in a physical fight.

> Absolutely! And I became so frustrated because I couldn't do that. And the only way I could get at them was to get a first. Only three of us got a first and I got the highest.

I told her that I found Oxford harder than Blakelaw, colder, more harsh. I ask if she felt the same about the LSE.

> Absolutely. Some of the worst cruelty I've witnessed came out of the LSE. I got this woman in to talk on World Hunger Day and some of the students threw sandwiches at her. They wouldn't have done that in Blakelaw. I thought, the way they talk about Blakelaw School and look at this. This is vile. This is the LSE and you're throwing sandwiches at a woman talking about World Hunger Day. Absolutely disgusting. And a lot of those people went on to become politicians and senior civil servants. And you judge us for thumping a teacher!!
>
> I was led to believe there was this nice world going on there and we were part of a hooligan tribe, here. And the idea you escape that into that world where everything is thought to be terribly civilised. And I thought I don't like this world. I prefer my world. There's much more compassion and humility here.

Sara's sense of achievement is not rooted in a sense of having overcome the effects of a disadvantaged childhood to gain a place at an elite university but rather, I suspect, the fact she survived the LSE and earned a better degree than her privately schooled, sandwich throwing peers:

> I'm very proud of my background. I'm not ashamed of it at all. A lot of people disassociate with it, don't they. I don't because how rich was that, the childhood that I had? And I always think I can survive the LSE but I bet the kids at the LSE couldn't survive Blakelaw.

…….

Thinking about violence whilst holding Bourdieu's concepts in mind animates Sara's account of her journey from Blakelaw to the LSE in ways that make sense of her exceptional academic achievement without resorting to a 'brightest and best', exceptional individual narrative. Sara's habitus can be seen to emerge from a complex entanglement of factors including the quality of her relationship with her parents, their orientation towards politics and social justice, the economic and social setting of her working class, urban, North Eastern childhood during the 80s and 90s, her body (including her hormones, diminutive size and physical skills), her early childhood difficulties in expressing her frustrations verbally, her Dad's reputation as a radgie and skills as a military physical training instructor, her confident and determined disposition, the smooth transition from primary school to Blakelaw, her largely positive relationships with teachers, her interest in learning, her developing political consciousness and her understanding of, and intolerance towards, social injustice and racism. Her habitus was well-matched to the field in which her schooling played out. It protected her and gave her space to engage with teachers and form positive relationships. Sara's fighting prowess, lack of physical fear and the co-incidence of the decision of a girl from a 'rough family' to pick a fight when Sara had bad PMT early in her Blakelaw career made a material difference to her educational trajectory. From a Bourdieusian perspective, Sara was rich in social and cultural capital despite the economic poverty of her childhood.

Sara's painful transition to the LSE (via a sixth form college, another environment in which she thrived educationally and socially) can be understood in terms of hysteresis - the dislocation between habitus and field that occurs as a result of changes in field conditions. Sara's strategies, disposition and 'feel for the game', once so well-matched to the conditions of her life, no longer worked as a means of safeguarding or improving her social position. Or at least those relating to the negotiation of violence, which took on an entirely different form at the LSE to the one she was used to. Her academic skills and ability to operate in the world of social justice campaigning maintained their currency as social and cultural capital so she

maximised them to achieve a first class degree. Sara went on to become a child poverty campaigner and lobbyist. She has influence and respect within her field. I haven't asked her what she earns but I think we can safely assume that her winning degree classification has not resulted in her earning more money than her public school educated peers. Their economically advantageous position, no doubt, remains intact.

*David*

The relationship of David's habitus to the field was, it seems, quite different to Sara's. David described himself as being a 'weedy, brainy lad' when he arrived at Blakelaw. Why then, did he leave school 5 years later with only one GCSE at grade C?

> In the early years, if I was interested in a subject and knew the answer I'd offer that up but in the later years I just wouldn't.

Why?

> Because people became more threatening and you didn't want to be in that brainy category. It was more just keep your head down.

He avoided being bullied, he told me, by:

> keeping my head down and my mouth shut and not getting categorized as a swot. Sometimes humour, but not with the hardest ones. Sometimes kids that thought they were cool took the mick out of my clothes cos, you know, we didn't have many named brands or anything. But I was just very quiet. ….. Sometimes in adult life I've found myself showing off a bit in work and I think some of that comes from the fact that in my formative years I'd often find myself feeling the internal frustration of 'I know this answer and nobody else does…but I'm not going say anything'. So I think now I can be the annoying person who answers 6 or 7 things in a row because I can.

> I've always been seen as a contributor in work. Not someone who sits silently at the back. It was freedom.

I asked if he was unhappy in school. It wasn't something we talked about at home, though I've always knew his experience of school was less positive than my own.

> Yes. I was unhappy. I think I'm quite a sensitive to threat person anyway. I don't know if Blakelaw made me like that. Even now I'm not that socially comfortable. I can feel anxious if I'm not with my own people. So being in such an extreme version of that where at any point there could be volatility…. But the thing about Blakelaw, it wasn't just the stuff targeted at you. It all builds up.

I remember a time when my R.E. teacher Mr. T asked me if my brother was 'on drugs' because he looked so spaced out. Stupidly, I told David. He was hurt and never forgot it. Years later he told me that what had upset him more than the accusation of drug taking was that Mr. T had noticed that he wasn't really 'present'. He was 'out of it', not because he'd taken anything, but because 'zoning out' was a means of getting through the day.

*Figure 18: David aged 11, Blakelaw first year*

When I ask if he was ever frightened of the teachers he tells me he wasn't and explains why.

> I didn't see anyone who wasn't…emm…I don't want to use the phrase 'who didn't deserve it'. Because by today's standards that wouldn't be acceptable. But certainly in those days…

You mean there was a cause and effect that made sense to you? I suggest.

> Yes, in that mind set and in that universe at the time they deserved it in some way, shape or form. It wasn't random. But it was disproportionate sometimes.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, David's habitus protected him from violent interactions with teachers. He is quiet and keeps his head down, behaviours associated with being a 'good boy'. He has a 'weedy' body (the habitus is always embodied) and is from a family with no experience of fighting or physical violence. But his quiet demeanour and ability to get on with people help him to avoid bullying. His habitus does not work to provide him with a space to engage with academic learning. That will come later for David.

*Alan*

When I asked Alan whether he ever looks back at the ubiquity of violence in various forms at Blakelaw and thinks that it shouldn't have happened, that something should have been done about it, he laughed:

> Not at all, not at all! I couldn't care. I know that sounds harsh but I couldn't. I think you get a different perspective from it. There was this woman in my team, very middle class. And there was a series of incidents where things got, in a non-violent way, very aggressive in work in meetings. She really struggled to deal with it. And I remember her basically implying that I could deal with it because I was a Geordie oik. And I was thinking, you're probably right. It doesn't faze me if someone screams and shouts in work.

Alan was never targeted, never frightened. Maybe this had something to do with his being part of an extended group of close friends though school, boys who, as men, remain friends today (a form of social capital). Maybe it was his ability to play football, his clothing (branded trainers and a Newcastle United football top), his academic ability (forms of cultural capital). The striking thing about Alan's account here is that his habitus, well adapted to thrive in overt conditions of aggression, was better suited to the

professional field in which he worked than the habitus of his middle-class colleague. Gender, of course, might have been relevant here but it is interesting that both Alan and his colleague agreed on the probable reason for his superior ability to cope.

…….

## 9.4 Good timing, chance encounters and lucky breaks

You might remember this quote from Bourdieu scholar Derek Robbins:

> Individuals in different situations have different capacities to generate positions, but all individuals possess some capacity for positional change. The extent to which this capacity is actualised depends on random encounters with other individuals and groups, such that social trajectories can never be fully calculated or predicted by detached observers. (2000, p.31)

When I thought about the materials I'd gathered with this in mind, I noticed the activating role chance encounters in several of our stories.

*Rob*

When Rob was 17 he met Lucy, a 21-year-old sociology graduate who was working in a supermarket on the street where Rob and I both lived (this was the 80s in Newcastle – new social science graduate job opportunities were few and far between). Lucy taught Rob the basics of reading and writing and provided his first exposure to middle-class family life, an experience that helped him to step back from and observe his own social background. The two engaged in (occasionally heated) discussions about the impact of socio-economic background on educational outcomes. By the time Rob encountered academic sociology within a higher educational setting it made sense to him. 'I'd lived it, after all.'

Rob thinks he would have probably taken a criminal route had he not met Lucy. He had opportunities, family links, social capital in that world. I challenged Rob on that view, forgetting to see him as my research contributor, remembering him as a gentle, thoughtful friend from my youth. I just couldn't imagine it.

> I wouldn't have enjoyed it. It would have been out of necessity. I would have had conflict... But I would have ended up going down that route. Think about the economy at the time, the way the government demonised the unemployed. Without Lucy I would have been stuck on the dole, no confidence to think I'd do this, that or the other, definitely no confidence to think I'd ever go to university. Lucy put that idea in my head. She used to say, you should go to university. You speak so much sense, more sense than some of the lecturers talked when I was there. You should be there.

Would Rob have learned to read, enrolled on an access course and gained a sociology degree without Lucy coming into his life? We'll never know, of course but Rob's chance meeting with her and their subsequent relationship certainly contributed to the conditions of possibility in which Rob's life took form. Though the mystery of why these two young people from different worlds were attracted to one another in the first place and were able to make a durable relationship remains intact.

*Sara*

Sara described three chance occurrences which she sees as having played a significant role in her educational journey. The first involved a meeting that would eventually expose Sara to experiences, ideas and people that might have influenced her educational trajectory:

> I was in town shopping and some people had a stall at the Monument[10] – sign a petition against something, anti-racism or something, and I signed it and got chatting to people and they were like, there's a demo. You want to go? And I was like, aye. Why not? Then you get to know people and I became really good friends with a woman who lived on Stanhope Street[11] and she'd done a full term for non-payment of poll tax and I just became really good mates with her and people like her. I was much younger but it was never an issue.

Sara's subsequent involvement in demos and campaigning, which can be seen as opportunities to acquire social and cultural capital, led to an exceptionally unusual encounter with unfamiliar place, culture and people.

> My form teacher was Mr B[12]. He knew my politics and interests, I was active in the Anti-Nazi League and anti-racism campaigns. He had received information about a North American Indian Project set up by two North East teachers. Once the American West was brought into the GCSE History curriculum there were many complaints about the lack of historical accuracy. Most of the text books were based on white settlers views, portrayed all Native Americans as nomadic, called teepees, wigwams (wooden logs) and women squaws (translation – vaginas). So a project had been set up with the aim to place English kids on a range of reservations, to develop GCSE resource materials for use in GCSE History classes and deliver teacher training. Mr. B put me forward. After an interview process I was selected as one of four students to go live on an Oglala Lakota Sioux Reservation in South Dakota. I went for the summer, lived with a family, went to high school, had to interview community members etc. I was 14. The other students were all very well off. I later learned I was chosen as the 'poor kid' so they had good representation! Ha! We had to fund raise for the

[10] Grey's Monument in the centre of Newcastle is a place where activists of various causes gather to campaign.

[11] Coincidentally, the street where Rob, David and I lived.

[12] Mr. B is the 'proper tekka' who allegedly once punched someone full on in the face. See page 22.

> project to go ahead. We wrote to businesses for corporate sponsorships, did fundraisers etc. The school knew my family would never be able to afford it! My parents were really active but had no money. The staff at the school were amazing put on race nights, did raffles – went out of the way to help me get my share to go!

The third chance occurrence involved an encounter, not with a person, but with a sociological textbook which her teacher Mr. T (the R.E. teacher who was pivotal in my own story) gave her:

> I was always quite bolshie, political and vocal in school. My relationship with a great majority of the teaching staff was positive and we used to debate current affairs, politics etc. It was never patronising and they knew I knew what I was talking about. I remember one of them crying when John Smith[13] died...anyway I'm already digressing! As a result of this the RE teacher Mr T. pulled me to one side one day and asked to meet me in the library, he said he'd had a book delivered he thought I would love. It was a sociology tome of a book – Haralambas and Holborn – classic, standard, at the time compulsory A level Sociology text book. Blakelaw didn't have a sixth form, offer A levels or teach sociology, so he gave it to me. I couldn't believe that you could study issues like sexism, racism and class! I went on to study A Level sociology at Tynemouth Sixth Form (got an A) and then do a BSc in sociology at the LSE (first class honours). It all started with that text book and an RE teacher who understood my interests and pointed me in the right direction! I still have it!!!

*David*

My brother describes how a chance meeting with a teaching assistant led to a chain of events the eventually led to him gaining a BA in religious studies and philosophy and a PGSC.

[13] The Leader of the Opposition (Labour) from 18 July 1992 until his death on 12 May 1994.

> When I turned 40, which was while I had the carpet cleaning business, I thought about the teaching thing again. So I was out of the corporate life and I thought it would be a lot easier to approach that now that I wasn't really making much money…I was thinking about it and I'd made enquiries at Northumbria University and I'd been talking with a tutor who seemed quite keen that I put in an application. This was for a B.Ed for primary school teaching. She was interested in my previous work experience and the fact I was male and 40. But the reason I didn't put in for it and that I actually said to myself, I'm going to write this off now and accept it isn't going to happen at 40 was purely because I didn't have the maths GCSE. I was just too mentally fatigued to think about trying to get that. Nothing was lining up….
>
> So at a later stage I was working with the Samaritans as a volunteer and I met this guy, middle class accent, really nice, lovely gentle guy. And me made some comment about the head teacher and I said, 'Oh, are you a teacher?' and he said, 'no, I'm a teaching assistant' and I was gobsmacked. Rightly or wrongly, I was gobsmacked that he was *only* [David mimes inverted commas] a teacher assistant.

The teaching assistant shared his story which involved walking away from a stressful career as a public servant and starting a teaching degree at 40 then coming to the conclusion that the part of the role he enjoyed most was giving direct support to children with additional leaning needs which he was able to do more of as a teaching assistant.

> So I was inspired by that and thought, that's exactly what I'm going to do. We're used to living on next to nothing from me now anyway. I'm going to do that.

David volunteered three days a week and qualified as a teaching assistant within the year. He loved it:

> It was lovely. I'd reinvented myself again. I was in another world. […]

> The first day I spent volunteering was probably the naturally highest I've ever been in my life. I spent the first day thinking I was going to be torn to shreds and I wasn't. Some fantastic kids in that school and within a couple of days they were like, Mr. Rogers, can you come and help us with this? And I found myself able to do it, able to explain things and they would get it. It was just a fit. I'd never felt that in the past. Even when I was a management professional. Everything I'd been chasing with that was about the buzz. And here I was, the lowest level in a classroom environment. A volunteer parent helper. But helping the kids, them trusting you, seeing them coming up that wasn't an excitement buzz. That was a feeling that I'm in the right place. Finally, this is what I'm suited to do.

He described how it was working as a volunteer and studying for his teaching assistant qualification that 'the seed was planted'.

> I started to get the real pang of wanting to be the person at the front. I imagined what it would be like to have overall responsibility for these kids so I started to think about it again. It came back into my head.

The expansion of mobile phone call centres in the North East of England during the late 90s can be seen as another example of good timing and luck relevant to David's eventual entry into higher education. He described his realisation in his early 20s that he could get stuck in a dead-end job. 8 years after entering the civil service on a government youth training scheme he applied for a job as a team leader in newly established call centre, 'exaggerating' his management experience in order to get an interview. His ability to adapt and 'learn the system' resulted in a steep rise in his earnings and status over a period of a few years. This confidence boosting experience gave him the opportunity to do a postgraduate certificate in management which, perhaps, made him more likely than he might overwise have been to eventually pursue his ambition to become a teacher. From a Bourdieusian perspective David's habitus is adaptable as it appears to incorporate an ability to cope with and thrive in new environments. His lack of cultural

capital in the form of qualifications does not hold him back within the corporate world or the world of undertaking enriching volunteer work but it is a barrier to his becoming a professional teacher.

*Alan*

Alan described two ‘strokes of luck’ that had an impact on his educational and professional trajectory. The first involved the timing of the floating of the Northern Rock building society after he’d finished his degree and didn’t know what to do next.

> There was nothing in Leeds. I came back and went on the dole, started applying for jobs. I didn’t have a clue. I just wanted to be back in Newcastle. I was working in an advertising agency, temping, really enjoying it and that was when Northern Rock building society gave savers free shares worth £2500 and an option to cash it in. And Newcastle University were offering a Masters degree for £2400 and all of a sudden I could afford it. Didn’t have a proper job and thought why not. At least I’ll have tried.

The second chance occurrence led to him getting a job that would later lead to him getting the opportunity to do a PhD.

> One funny story - my first job at Uni after finishing my MSc was with a very high profile Prof. He hired me and in my first week said something along the lines of "there were 5 applicants, all with a basic BSc-MSc CV. I gave them to my wife (a teacher) and she said 'if this guy came though Blakelaw ok you should give him a shot' so I did". Thanks Boss!

My own story, as you know, involves the very specific timing of the Marxist chaplain’s letter to teachers in schools in socially deprived areas. A year later and I would have already been studying at Manchester. Up until the end of my first year of A Levels I’d intended to do a geography based degree. Maybe town planning or climatology. I’d got my only grade A in O Level

geography. I loved my teacher, Mr. C, and was doing well in my A level when he left to go on secondment at the beginning of my final year. After that I lost interest and decided to apply for degrees in comparative religion. Which is when the letter arrived from the Marxist chaplain.

Thinking with Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus and capital draws my attention to the elements around these chance occurrences that enabled us all to turn them into social advantage, unconsciously but effectively. Rob did not become 'intelligent' or 'capable' after he met Lucy. She was, it seems, drawn to this young, unemployed man with no qualifications because she recognised his brightness and ability. He'd developed skills and strategies before he met her. Lucy, Rob told me, 'was a catalyst who made me realised I was more than that'. Rob's ability to engage 'intelligently' with a sociology graduate might have had something do to with his dyslexic brain, his access to current affair and news programmes on TV and the relationships he had with his mother and grandmother. His habitus was, perhaps, a form of cultural capital that more than off-set his lack of symbolic capital in the form of qualifications.

Sara had parents who were politically active and supportive of their children. They trusted Sara and gave her freedom to experience things most children of her age had not. Chance and timing played their part in her making friends with political activists, staying the summer on a reservation in the US and being given a book by a teacher who knew her and cared about her. But these opportunities would most likely not have presented themselves if she did not already had a habitus well suited to the fields in which they arose. Sara might have been the hardest girl in the school but she was also popular with teachers. A well-matched habitus is a capital-building opportunity magnet. The chance occurrences in my own story also relate to my existing capital as a well-liked pupil who was considered by teachers to be bright.

David already had a dream to teach. The chance meeting with the teaching assistant might have been pivotal but perhaps he'd have overcome the barriers to his becoming a teacher at a later stage in a different way.

It was a stroke of luck that Alan came into the right amount of money as an opportunity to do a vocationally focused MSc presented itself. But that would have been irrelevant had his habitus not inclined him towards the conversation of economic capital into cultural capital (an education, vocational training and qualifications) that would subsequently result in his improving his economic position. The advice his boss's wife gave his boss regarding the recruitment of someone from Blakelaw shows how being seen to be someone who has done well academically despite their schooling is a form of cultural capital in itself, something which certainly benefited me in relation to my entry to Oxford University.

### 9.5 A taste for necessity

You'll remember that Bourdieu coined the term 'a taste for necessity' to describe the mirroring of our aspirations and tastes and the "concrete indices of the accessible and the inaccessible, of what is and is not 'for us'" (Bourdieu 1993, p.64; see also 1984, p.173). I told you in chapter 2 how a teacher told my mam that I could be university material at a parents' evening when I was 14. How I hadn't really considered the possibility before and how, when I discussed the incident with my mam recently she said, echoing Bourdieu's words:

> It's not that I thought you weren't good enough. It's just that university didn't happen to the likes of us.

It was not the case, however, that the 'indices of the inaccessible' were stacked against us. I did my undergraduate degree before the introduction of fees and loans and was awarded a full maintenance grant. I did have to work every vacation to supplement it and left university with an overdraft and loan that the bank insisted I start paying off immediately. But I wasn't aware that this would be the case when the idea of going to university was first presented to us. I've also told you that I had middle class friends in church who had siblings at university and who expected to go themselves. I lived on an estate positioned in between an area of private rental properties

popular with students and the university campus in the city centre so I saw students (easily identifiable by their style) walk past my house every morning. I wonder if these things eased the opening of my mind to the possibility of university once it was suggested? Through a Bourdieusian lens, I already had a certain amount of social capital (relationships with people who assumed university was for the likes of them) and access to the necessary economic capital to at least enter the system, if not maximise the opportunities presented within it. My habitus incorporated a view of myself as 'different' and a certain contrariness which perhaps made me more likely to seize upon an opportunity to do something strange that no one would have expected from me.

*Sara*

When I met Sara she told me that, despite the economic conditions of her childhood, she'd been encouraged to think there was nothing she couldn't do:

> My mam grew up in Scotswood, was the youngest of seven children and she had to leave school at 14 to look after her sister's kids. My dad joined the forces at 16 and he was a Physical Training Instructor. He got out the army and worked in security. Neither had any formal qualifications but they were both very bright, very enthusiastic about education, that it was your route out. Encouraged all of us to study and read. They would say you can do anything you want in life, no one can stop you. Do whatever you want. But we lived in dire poverty. My dad was blacklisted for trade union activity. He was unemployed during the 80s. My mam was working in a supermarket. You know, so they said you could do anything but we didn't have anything. And we didn't get out of Blakelaw, we didn't go anywhere or do anything. We just read a lot of books.

I ask her if she remembers thinking, 'yes, I am going to get out of here'.

> No, I mean I didn't know what getting out of there meant because I'd never been anywhere. So I had no frame of reference. But I was very confident. And I did think, yes, I can do whatever I want.

Sara was in the last cohort to receive a free university education but did take out student loans during her time as an undergraduate. Like me, she had to work to supplement her grant and talked about the shock of realising how expensive it was going to be to live in London. But she'd also witnessed the determination of her parents and teachers to raise enough money for her to be able to take up her place on the North American reservation project. Her exposure to people she met through her campaigning activities might have been another factor in the configuration of events and influences that ensured she would come to see herself as someone who could make it to university:

> I'd go to demos. I'd get to meet people. People who were at university. People who were teachers. And I would think, well you are no better than me. You are exactly the same and that kind of blew away the myth that someone there were these intelligent people that knew stuff I didn't know.

*Rob*

Rob did not consider the possibility of university until he met Lucy. But it's possible that his developing political understanding of social class and inequality facilitated an eventual belief that this was something that might be 'for him'. He was able to access a free education and a grant, though it can't have been easy to make ends meet given that Lucy and Rob were parents by the time he'd started his degree.

*David*

I struggled to apply the notion of a 'taste for necessity' in my brother's account of his journey from Blakelaw to University, so I asked him if he

thought there'd been an event that had encouraged him to think that he might be able to go to university one day. This was his response:

> Getting a degree was never of interest, at school or subsequently once I'd started working. The only degrees that ever interested me were ones with a very direct vocational route. In 2009 I really fancied doing the Psychiatric Nursing degree - but financially I couldn't give up work at that time. The ambition to be a primary teacher pre-dates the Psych. Nursing interest. So when I was (thanks to my wife) able to stop working for 4 yrs, that was the route I chose. Degrees themselves, and academia more generally have never appealed or interested me. Not related to confidence or ability in any way; I just find academia detached from my everyday environment and experience, too limiting and structured in its learning framework. I didn't enjoy doing my degree with OU (although do rate OU as an institution, for others), but loved my teacher training year.

One could see David's orientation to higher education as a good example of Bourdieu's taste of necessity. He left school with one GCSE at grade C but made a success of his career in terms of his earning and status. He also had children. Doing a degree for interest or fun without a clear idea of where it would lead to in terms of job prospects would have been unthinkable, I suspect. Though it is also quite possible that even if he'd had a more positive experience at school and left with good qualifications he might have always been drawn to more vocational degree courses or indeed a profession that required 5 GSCEs but not a degree.

*Alan*

When I asked Alan whether he could remember the point at which it occurred to him that he might go to university he replied:

> Oh I was always going, I was always going. It was never an option not to go.

I wasn't expecting that answer. But maybe I should have. This is an excerpt from an email Alan sent to me before we met:

> I was lucky to have a Mum that worked in an admin job at the Uni, and in all honesty who had fairly lofty expectations for me. She was bright only she has no formal qualifications as that was the norm at the time I guess. She went straight into Vickers factory at 16 & did well as she's not daft. My parents split when I was 1 yr old & I was brought up with my Mum & a very strict Gran. I saw some exceptionally bright lads at Blakelaw fall away (and worse) due to neither school nor family supporting them.

This support can be seen as a form of social capital. But the interesting thing here in terms of the 'taste for necessity', and the constraining or reinforcing power it can have as an inhibitor of social boundary breeching, is that Alan's mum's 'lofty expectations'. When we talked about it in person he speculated that his mum's job, which involved working amongst academics, students and colleagues who assumed their children would go to university, was a factor. She was, for example, aware of the frameworks of support set up in other schools to facilitate pupils' transition to university:

> Mum would come back from work and ask, have you had this? Have you had that? Have you talked to such and such, cos these other schools would do outreach to universities and things like that. I came to realise that, hang on, this place isn't really set up to drive you at that age.

### 9.6 The right of entry and desire to do so

Bourdieu reasoned that in order to enter a field a person needs 'not only the right of entry but also the desire to do so' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1993, p. 21). A 'right of entry' is a complex state of relational affairs and not something gained automatically simply because a person has a legal right to

do something. The recollections of two of my contributors in particular resonated with this thinking.

*David*

At the point at which David first thought seriously about the possibility of applying to university to retrain as a teacher, he had a number of GCSEs, gained in his early 20s in night school, but he was still without a maths qualification. As indicated above, his difficulties in trying to find a way of gaining a qualification had brought him to a point where he decided not to proceed. Having opened his mind again to the possibility he once more set about trying to gain a maths GCSE. Given his child care responsibilities and financial circumstances at the time, he wanted to make arrangements to study himself and sit the exam as soon as possible.

> It seemed impossible for me to sit a maths GCSE without a huge time commitment. Just to get a maths GCSE. And I knew I could blast it. I was willing to put the work in. I'm actually not that bad at maths. I'd got a D in school and I help [my daughter] with her maths.
>
> This was in March. I wrote to loads of schools, in Durham, in Newcastle and most of them didn't respond to emails. And maybe a third of them said, no, we only take candidates who have been to our school for tuition. But why? What's the reason? I wanted to start a degree course that year. I found a tutor online but when I was asking him about the exam he had no idea. He just gave me a list of schools, the schools I'd already been in touch with. And that was going to cost £300 for the tutor with no guarantee of an exam at the end.
>
> I was about to give up, when at last I had a positive response from a school. It was so late in the day I had to pay double the fee as a late entrant. And it's not like we had money but I really didn't care. I was just so happy. So I bought the books and worked harder on that than anything else I've done. I worked every night and bought mock papers

> and practiced those. And when I sat it, it was fine. Very basic. I got 94% and the teacher, a lovely bloke, said you should have sat the higher paper. But I was doing it for a reason. I don't think I'll have that sense of achievement with the degree. The one thing I'm really proud of is that I moved mountains to get this. To be in March and not to have had any teaching in maths for 25 years and then to get to August and have a GCSE I was really chuffed about that. It was so hard finding a channel to get that qualification. It was easy to get on a degree course as a mature student. But so hard to get that GCSE.

The systems one has to negotiate in order to breach a social class boundary are generally set up and administered by those who are firmly positioned on 'the other side'. The right to proceed is often 'academic' within the context of lives shaped by the material impact of a childhood deprived of the types of capital enjoyed and valued by those of a higher social class. This is not to say our backgrounds were less cultural or less social, just less cultural and social in the 'right' way, and certainly less financially privileged.

*Sara*

Sara entered the LSE with good A Level results (and without the help of a Marxist academic). The quantity and standard of the work did not come as a shock to her. The hardness she encountered did:

> It was very condescending, very humiliating, very belittling. People from a certain background have a sense of entitlement so it was 'what on earth are you doing here? You've got no place here.' Even though I got a better degree than them in the end. But that kind of self-confidence and sense of self-worth and [she pauses] ...hatred of people from working class backgrounds, really.

I ask what the impact was:

> It made me more determined to do well at the LSE. I didn't really get involved in student life. I thought, I'll just study and prove you wrong.

> But everyone reacts differently. A lot of people left the LSE early on. I knew a few who left, just couldn't handle it. Just couldn't bear it.

The financial cost of an LSE education also acted as a barrier to social boundary breeching for some. Here Sara and her mam remember her graduation:

> I was just so proud.

'But do you not remember how ridiculous is was?', asks Sara. 'The smoked salmon?', her mam replies.

> Yes. And my dad not wanting any orange juice in his champers cos he'd paid £20 for his ticket. He didn't want it diluted.

Totally fair enough, I say! Sara's mam starts to laugh:

> I was there with my video camera. Everyone was walking up getting their degrees and shaking hands. Very polite. And Sara walked on stage and her Dad was going "GO ON SARA, GO ON!". I laugh every time it gets to that point in the video. It's just this polite applause and then 'GO ON SARA, GO ON!"
>
> And there was no videoing in the auditorium!

We laugh and I feel a sense of connection to them both. Getting a place to study at an 'elite' university is one thing. Making it out in one piece with a degree at the other end is another entirely.

Sara goes on:

> Two of the people I was friends with didn't take part in the ceremony because it was so expensive. You had to get the gown and the tickets so they hadn't done it but they came along and I gave my gown to them so we could take photos for their mams. But that's how ridiculous it was, pricing people out, even at that stage.

And as I type this my heart is pounding and I can feel the tension that runs from my throat to my solar plexus and I'm pressing it right now right now and it is tender. Some experiences leave their marks on the body no matter how many times we reinterpret them in light of what came after.

## 9.7 Analytical insights

Bourdieu has been useful in generating interpretations that highlight the complex, dynamic and relational contexts in which going to university became feasible for us. As I suspected before I finished writing the chapter[14], thinking with Bourdieu does indeed facilitate an analysis of exceptional trajectories, educational or otherwise, without the theoretical need for exceptional individuals, the brightest and best, who hold within them the secret to their success nor automatons who are fixed on inevitable paths dictated by external forces. Thinking with Bourdieu shows how paths to university only materialised as such within a constellation of conditions that included a particular configuration of family background, history, economic conditions, chance encounters, physical attributes, skills, dispositions, relationships, policies, assumptions, timing and interactions with others, both human and other than human. It's impossible to separate a person's desire and ability to take a path into higher education from the conditions in which the path materialises.

Having said that – and I really like this, Reader - there is always room for a little mystery with Bourdieu. A sense of 'yes, but why?' that pushes beyond the differences we are able to perceive and pin down. I am left with *both* an understanding (an interpretation) of the features of our lives that explain, to some extent, why we ended up going to university when most of our peers did not *and* a sense of mystery and uncertainty.

[14] Which is unsurprising since I formulated my guiding question for this chapter whilst I was thinking with Bourdieu about my materials (which were becoming data).

# Chapter 10

# Barad's Intra-action

*[The historical materialist] regards it as his task to brush history against the grain.*

*(Walter Benjamin* 1999, p.248)

## 10.1 Purpose of this chapter

Karen Barad's new-materialist theory of intra-action emphasises the deep relationality of the world. This chapter aims to provide you with an understanding of the concept of which will enable you to engage with my attempts to put intra-action to work in the next chapter. In 10.2 I describe the new materialist project to which Barad is a contributor. In 10.3. I attempt to summarise the principles of Borhian quantum physics that frame Barad's work. In sections 10.4 – 10.7. I set out Barad's conceptualisations of the notions of agency, time, 'ethico-onto-epistemology', diffraction and the subject. And in 10.8. I summarise the key features of the concept of 'intra-action' which cannot be separated from the ideas presented in these sections.

## 10.2 The new materialist project

The term 'new materialism', provides an intelligible label for a 'post'-inclined philosophical and ethical project that started to become recognisable as such during the late 1990s. The scholars engaged in it as concept builders and social researchers[15] have backgrounds in a range of disciplines including the natural sciences, the humanities and everything in between[16]. Whilst the work of new materialists has differing emphases they share some fundamental characteristics in their treatment of previous academic traditions in relation to: the discursive/material binary (they reject it); onto-epistemology (matters of being and knowing are inextricably mangled); an emphasis on the entangled role of matter, the non-human and language in forming the world; and an understanding of 'the world' as inclusive of, and inseparable from, 'us' as fragmented, unfixed, inter-dependent subjects.

[15] For example: Rosi Braidotti; Manuel DeLanda; Quentin Meillassoux; Maggie MacLure; Susan Nordstrom; Rachel Holmes; Yvonne Marshall, to name but a few.

[16] If the natural sciences and humanities were separate categories or positioned at each end of a spectrum, which a new materialist perspective would reject.

Thinking with new materialist concepts requires some fundamental moves away from understandings and assumptions that are ingrained across much of academia and 'Western' thinking in general. I first encountered new materialism in 2015 at the Summer Institute in Qualitative Research (SIQR) in Manchester when a speaker talked about the stones by a brook, not as passive, inanimate objects but as actors involved in the creation of the children who pick them up, turn them over in their hands and skim them across the water. I'd already stepped over a mental threshold to adopt a poststructural worldview by then, embracing its vision of the person as a site of ever-changing, conflicting identities, endlessly (re)produced within social power relations. And yet (because I am the site of fragmented, unfixed, contradictory identities myself) I resisted the idea that the material might sensibly be understood to have agency. In fact, I found the idea irritating. The whole point of the word 'agency' is to say something about the intentionality of an actor, isn't it? How can stones have intentions?

Understanding came slowly, surprising me at times, like when a previously impenetrable passage in a book suddenly started to make sense for reasons I couldn't explain. Only at a distance, though. The second I attempted to apply the ideas to my area of research interest or explain them to someone less familiar with this way of thinking than me, the weakness of my grasp became clear. I could not pass the threshold of understanding where a theoretical paradigm makes sense in such a way that you can't remember why it didn't all along. I entered the domain of new materialist thinking via Karen Barad whose book, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007) had inspired many of the speakers at the SIQR. I came to realise that my understanding would be unlikely to progress without some engagement with the Bohrian quantum theory that acts as a metaphor (and something in excess of a metaphor) for her social critical theoretical work. So I gave it a go.

### 10.3 And now for some Bohrian Quantum Physics

Engaging with Bohrian Quantum Physics was - is - tricky. I haven't studied physics since 1983 when I was 14 years old. I don't have a basic qualification

in regular physics, never mind quantum physics of the Borhian variety. I'm going to be honest with you. I've had to take Barad at her word on a lot of this. I'd like to have an understanding that would enable me to engage critically with her chosen (more than a) metaphor. But my funding ran out in December 2017 and the ESRC requires me to submit this thesis by the end of 2018. Needs must. So here goes. This is my take on the Borhian quantum theory that underpins Barad's notion of intra-action.

Niels Bohr, a Nobel Prize winning contemporary of Einstein, challenged the assumption of classical Newtonian theory that all individual entities have fixed characteristics, for example, being a 'particle' or a 'wave', having a 'position' and a 'momentum'. I've used scare quotes because, according to Bohr (according to Barad), the notion of position 'cannot be presumed to be a well-defined abstract concept, nor can it be presumed to be an inherent attribute of independently existing objects' (Barad 2003, p.814). The notion of position only makes sense when apparatus with fixed parts are used to measure it. Wave, particle, position and momentum are not attributable to individual entities. They are the properties of what Bohr called phenomenon which embody what Barad describes as 'the inseparability of "observed object" and "agencies of observation"' (2003, p.814). To put it another way:

> the so-called subject, the so-called instrument, and the so-called object of research are always already entangled, and [...] measurements are the entanglement of matter and meaning" (Barad 2012, p.15).

'Always already' is the operative phrase here. This is not simply about the 'contamination' of the research object by the researcher's act of observation and measurement. As Barad explains:

> when we make a measurement, what happens is that it is not a matter of disturbing something and our knowledge is uncertain as a result, but rather there are not inherent properties and there are not inherent boundaries of things that we want to call entities before the measurement intra-action (2012, p.62)

There's more.

In a published interview with Dolphijn and van der Tuin in their book *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (2012), Barad describes an empirical experiment based on Bohrian principles which appears to show that actions taken post-experiment can have an ontological impact on what happened earlier (pp. 63-5), i.e. change the meaning, the material outcome, of an earlier state of affairs. The experiment is presented in greater detail in chapter seven of Barad's Meeting the Universe Halfway (2007). It involves micromaser cavities and rubidium atoms, laser beams and erased information. Having no qualification in physics, I struggle to grasp what it all means. This is what Barad, who has a doctorate in theoretical physics, says it means:

> In other words, after the rubidium atom has already hit, I am able to determine whether or not it had behaved like a particle or a wave. In other words, whether or not it had gone through a single slit at a time, like a particle will, or gone through both slits at the same time like a wave will. *In other words, after it has already hit the screen and gone through the apparatus, I am able to determine its ontology, afterwards.* (2012 p. 65, original emphasis).

Before we get over-excited about the prospect of going back in time to take alternative paths, avoiding those we have come to regret, Barad rejects the 'nostalgic fantasy' that what the experiment shows is that we can change the past as if it never happened. No, 'the experiment is not about engaging a past that already was' (2012, p.65). What the experiment does suggest is that the meaning of past events, how they have or might yet come to matter, is never fixed, never done. And so:

> [i]n an important sense, the "past" is open to change. It can be redeemed, productively reconfigured in an iterative unfolding of spacetimematter. But its sedimenting effects, its trace, can not be erased. The memory of its materializing effects is written into the

> world. So changing the past is never without costs, or responsibility. (Karen Barad 2012, p.67)

Responding to the implications of Bohr's theory and the findings of the empirical experiments it inspired, Barad has built and re-worked a number of concepts which have major implications for social researchers who wish to put them to work. All relate to the notion of intra-action.

### 10.4 Agency: it's not all about you

Influenced by Bohrian Quantum Physics, Barad wants to displace 'the very notion of independently existing individuals' (2012, p. 54). This is not a statement about the interdependence of human beings. People, from Barad's perspective, exist and emerge as such within an inextricable entanglement of matter and language:

> Neither is articulated/articulable in the absence of the other; matter and meaning are mutually articulated. Neither discursive practices nor material phenomena are ontologically or epistemologically prior. Neither can be explained in terms of the other. Neither has privileged status in determining the other. (Barad 2003, p.822).

This makes agency a tricky concept. Barad tries 'to stay away from using the term "agent," or even "actant," because these terms work against the relational ontology I am proposing' (p.54). Acknowledging the 'gravitational force of humanism', however, she opts to rework the term, sous rature, 'in ways that are appropriate to relational ontologies' (Barad 2003, p. 54). Barad developed the concept of agential realism to describe the 'space of possibilities' in which agency can sensibly be said to operate from a new materialist perspective (p.54). For Barad, as for Bohr, there are no pre-existing entities: it is impossible to separate rivers, trees and rocks, researchers, methodologies and research objects from the complex, entangled assemblage of conditions integral to their existence. In other words:

> ‘Existence is not an individual affair’; there is ‘no independent, self-contained existence’ in the world (2007, ix).

Barad uses the term ‘relata’ to refer to what would have previously been seen as entities or things which, from this new perspective, emerge from intra-actions which ‘enact agential separability’ (Barad 2003, p.815). And so within a research context, categories, subjects, focus, questions, methods, methodologies are all relata created in the mix. Everything comes into being in relation. From this perspective it makes sense that matter - always in relation to, always in context - acts in its contribution to the intra-active ‘soup’ in which new relata, matter and meanings emerge.

This thinking is incompatible with the idea that the purpose of a social research project is to represent existing entities and their relationships to one another. It also renders senseless the suggestion that language creates realities independently of material existence. Nor is it good enough to present reality as interaction between and amongst material things and discourse because that thinking requires separate entities capable of interacting with one another before the encounter. Once we start to think in this way ‘agency’ can no longer refer to the capacity of an individual human to act. It is instead mutually produced within human and non-human intra-actions, ‘a dynamic and shifting entanglement of relations, rather than a property of things’ (Barad, 2007, p. 224).

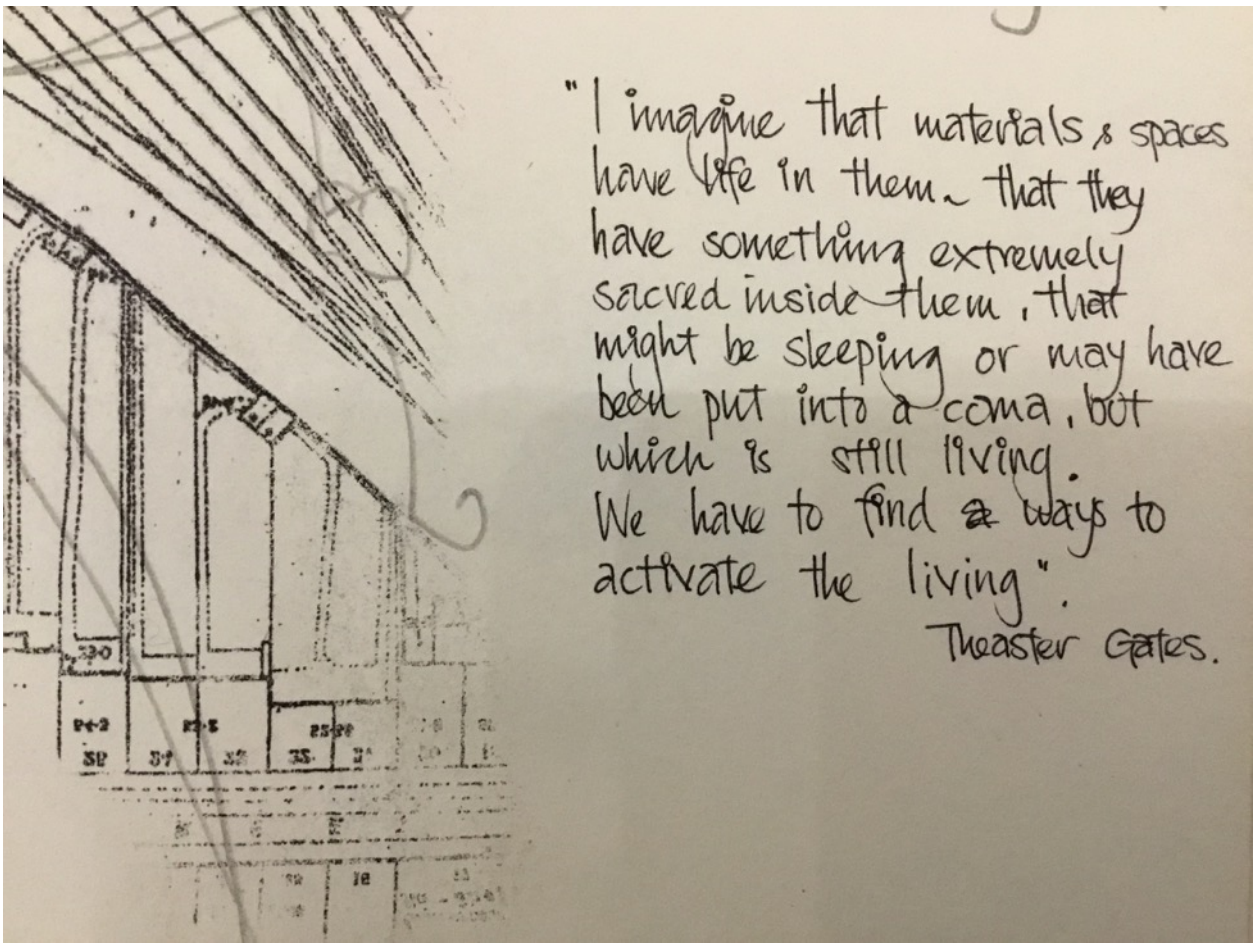



*Figure 19: Excerpt from a notebook, Marega Palser, 2018.*

### 10.5 Time to think again

For Barad, time is relational, something which is 'articulated and re-synchronized through various material practices' (Barad 2012, p.66). The traces of discreet moments in time - failed exams, PMT fuelled fights, trips to Native American Reserves - cannot be undone. Nevertheless, the past remains open to reconfiguration and therefore reparation: as Bohrian quantum physics suggests, what comes after can materially alter the meaning and impact of what came before. But how?

My understanding of what Barad is suggesting here is influenced by the writings of Walter Benjamin who died in 1940, sixteen years before Barad

was born and decades before the emergence of new materialist thinking. Benjamin wrote against the concept of history as a linear sequence of events:

> Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus, he establishes a conception of the present as the 'time of the now' which is shot through with chips of Messianic time. (1999, p.255)

A constellation comprises stars of different proportions and provenance, the image of which takes form at a specific point in time and space. The stars are material - real - but the pattern of the constellation is radically altered if viewed from Venus or Sirius rather than from Earth, or from a point in time millions of years in the past or the future. Similarly, the past - your own or that of a place or a people or a word or an idea - appears to have a linear, causal relationship with the present. But a shift in position (resulting from exposure over time to new experiences and ideas, people, places and things) changes the relationship of the present to past events: academic failure is now an indicator of intelligence and resilience; what was civilised is now implicated in brutality; what was common sense now presents as ridiculous. Benjamin's 'messianic chips' can be understood as fragments from the past – for example, in the form of recollections, images, artefacts, letters – that have the capacity to blast apart taken for granted assumptions about history, creating new constellations of meaning, matter and causality.

Neither Barad, the new materialist social theorist and quantum physicist, nor Benjamin, the quasi-Marxist-philosopher and essayist deny that events happen in a chronological order. Rather, both are concerned with the dynamic and complex relationship between past, present and future which is

forever open to reconfiguration. For Barad, temporality itself is constituted within the interactive entanglement of the world:

> Intra-actions are temporal, not in the sense that the values of particular properties change in time; rather, which property comes to matter is re(con)figured in the very making/marking of time (2007, p.180).

Both Benjamin and Barad encourage us to think beyond an assumption that things and events are necessarily best considered according to the markers of time measuring instruments (minutes, days, years, childhood, adulthood etc). And so, in terms of this project, it might be more fruitful - make more of a difference - to consider phenomena that span decades as assemblages of inextricably materially and discursively interlinked relata rather than focus on an arbitrary period of chronological time like 'school days' or 'entry to university'. This thinking creates an opportunity for redemption, both through the reanimation of a past which has been largely forgotten or was never remembered until now, and the dislodging of the captured past from the framework of meaning in which it is stuck.

### 10.6 Ethico-onto-epistemology and diffraction.

Bohr's theories, and subsequent empirical experiments driven by those theories, show how measuring apparatus work to constitute the things they measure. Barad pushes this insight further with her agential realist account of the world which sees the ontological (what exists) and the epistemological (what is known about what exists) as inseparable:

> [The] knower does not stand in a relation of absolute externality to the natural world – there is no such exterior observational point. [.....] We are not outside observers of the world. Neither are we simply located at particular places *in* the world; rather, we are part of the world in its ongoing intra-activity. (Barad 2007, p. 184)

The drawing of boundaries intrinsic to any research project has ontological and ethical implications because:

> knowing is a direct material engagement, a cutting together-apart, where cuts do violence but also open up and rework the agential conditions of possibility. (Barad 2012, p.52)

Ethical responsibility, from this perspective, involves responsiveness to the ever-unfolding entanglement of relationalities in which we are implicated and produced. Research is a particular kind of ethico-onto-epistemological activity because:

> [m]aking knowledge is not simply about making facts but about making worlds, or rather, it is about making specific worldly configurations – not in the sense of making them up ex nihilo, or out of language, beliefs or ideas, but in the sense of materially engaging as part of the world in giving it specific material form. (Barad 2007, p.91)

Barad's ethico-onto-epistemology has implications for methodology, including the addressing, in the thesis, of the researcher's role in the production of knowledge. Barad does not care for the metaphor of reflection:

> Mirrors reflect. To mirror something is to provide an accurate image or representation that faithfully copies that which is being mirrored. Hence mirrors are an often-used metaphor for representationalism and related questions of reflexivity. For example, a scientific realist believes that scientific knowledge accurately reflects physical reality, whereas a strong social constructivist would argue that knowledge is more accurately understood as a reflection of culture, rather than nature. (Barad 2007, p.86)

Barad, who rejects the idea that representations and 'the real' are separate entities, prefers the relational metaphor of diffraction. As I explained in section 7.2. diffraction patterns are exhibited by water, sound and light

waves when they encounter another body. Diffraction works as a methodological metaphor in a number of overlapping ways. Firstly, it lends a new materialist slant to the idea of researcher reflexivity which I talked about in section 4.16 by stressing the entanglement of subject (researcher), object (that which is being researched) and the instrument (the methodology and methods) so that:

> objectivity, instead of being about offering an undistorted mirror image of the world, is about accountability to marks on bodies, and responsibility to the entanglements of which we are a part. (Barad 2012, p.52)

Diffraction thus emphasises the researcher's involvement rather than her situatedness. Secondly, as I outlined in chapter 7.2, the diffraction metaphor treats texts and theories, not as pre-existing, stand-alone entities, but as entangled, intra-active forces which produce new texts by reading 'insights through one another' (Barad 2012, p. 50). This is what I have called a conversation. Barad encourages us to read texts neither deferentially 'as scripture', nor 'carelessly, as an 'undutiful daughter' (Barad 2012, p. 58) but rather respectfully. We should be attentive to their content and context but also allow ourselves to gain insights from one text into the other, disregarding disciplinary or genre boundaries:

> It is difficult to see the diffraction patterns—the patterns of difference that make a difference— when the cordoning off of concerns into separate domains elides the resonances and dissonances that make up diffraction patterns that make the entanglements visible. (Barad 2012, p.50)

An example of this kind of diffractive reading is my bringing together texts by Walter Benjamin and Karen Barad in 7.5 above to gain a richer perspective on time, history and the potential for change. What we bring to our reading, consciously or not, makes a difference to the patterns created when ideas and experiences collide. For Barad, reading and writing are ethical practices

and a diffractive approach to texts functions in a more ethical way than critique which she characterises as 'a destructive practice meant to dismiss, to turn aside, to put someone or something down— another scholar, another feminist, a discipline, an approach, etc' (Barad, 2012, p. 49).

Thirdly, a diffractive analysis involves consideration of how specific intra-actions come to make a difference, how they make a difference and for whom. This requires close reading, a sensitivity to small things that might not fall easily into the larger categories on which much social science research depends (e.g. social class, gender, educational attainment etc). It demands attendance to what happens at the intersections of humans and non-humans, discourse, bodies, meanings and matter. A diffractive reading that looks out for differences that come to matter should make us more, not less, attentive to patterns of inequality since it 'speaks to the particularities of the power imbalances of the complexity of a field of forces' (2012, p.55).

### 10.7 Baradian subjectivity

For Foucault, Butler and other thinkers whose work can be categorised broadly as poststructural, subjectivity is not stable or essential but something enacted though a range of practices and performances that form the categories of being of which they speak. Barad's conception of subjectivity is not necessarily at odds with this perspective but she does go further in stressing the entanglement of matter, the non-human and the human in the production of subjectivity. Human subjects are constituted though complex human, non-human and material intra-actions. They emerge from a 'field of possibilities' that is 'not static or singular but a dynamic and contingent multiplicity' (Barad 2003, p.819). This thinking provides opportunities for new subjective configurations, new ways of materialising as a person. It also presents a challenge to the researcher whose PhD is framed as an individual effort and whose contributors are, perhaps, used to framing their recollections and self-understanding according to traditional humanist assumptions about agency and identity.

## 10.8 Intra-action: a recap

You'll have noticed that I've used the term intra-action several times already in the hope that locating it in context alongside related ideas will illustrate the way in which it flows through Barad's thinking. So, what I present now is a recap. Barad uses the neo-logism 'intra-action' rather than the term 'interaction' because the latter assumes the pre-existence of separate entities that proceed their interaction. In contrast, intra-action suggests that the entities that appear to be separate - e.g. schools, fights, teachers, successes, failures, educational trajectories - emerge within entanglements of the human and non-human, discourse and matter over time and space. Intra-action concerns the simultaneous production of the ontological and the epistemological which is always already an ethical matter. Agency is not something held by individuals but something that emerges within intra-active entanglements of human and non-human, bodies and discourses, meanings and matter, the temporal and the spatial. Causal relationships are not static but things that emerge within intra-active entanglements across time. Relationships between past, present and future are not fixed. This provides opportunities to bring new pasts into being (i.e. ones that previously did not 'make the cut' in terms of our remembering and constituting of history), and to redeem remembered pasts through a process of reconfiguration. The concept of intra-action encourages us to consider how small differences come to matter and for whom. Viewed holding the concept of intra-action in mind, research is a deeply relational endeavour since the researcher is entangled within the production of knowledge.

# Chapter 11

# Thinking with Intra-action

*Is it time uninterrupted? Only the present comprehended? Are our thoughts nothing but passing trains, no stops, devoid of dimension, whizzing by massive posters with repeating images? Catching a fragment from a window seat, yet another fragment from the next identical frame? If I write in the present yet digress, is that still real time? Real time, I reasoned, cannot be divided into sections like numbers on the face of a clock. If I write about the past as I simultaneously dwell in the present, am I still in real time? Perhaps there is no past or future, only the perpetual present that contains this trinity of memory.*

Patti Smith, M-Train, 2015

## 11.1 Purpose of the chapter

This chapter uses Barad's concept of intra-action as a means of exploring some of the material and temporal aspects of our surprising educational journeys. In 11.2 I explore ways in which entanglements of matter and discourse can be seen to have produced some of the conditions of possibility under which my contributors and I ended up going to university. In 11.3 I explore the redemptive capability of intra-action as a theory that does not see the past as fixed. In 11.4 I reflect on some analytical insights produced by my thinking with intra-action in this chapter.

I used the following questions to guide my thinking in this chapter:

> *How might entanglements of matter and discourse have contributed to the conditions of possibility in which our educational trajectories took form?*
>
> *How might thinking with intra-action produce opportunities to redeem pasts that hurt?*

## 11.2 Bodies that matter

Thinking with intra-action emphasises the entanglements of bodies, matter and discourse that produce what we come to recognise as our educational trajectories. I gathered accounts and artefacts from my contributors before I decided to use intra-action as a theory to think with. Having listened to the recordings of our conversations and read our email correspondence again holding Barad's thinking in mind, I noticed that bodies, clothes and hairstyles made an appearance, sometimes at important junctures, in all our accounts of our journeys through Blakelaw and onto university.

*Alan*

Here Alan describes an uncomfortable encounter at an event held at Newcastle University between Blakelaw sixth formers and pupils from schools that routinely had pupils going on to university:

> I remember turning up at a Duke of Edinburgh event at the University and thinking, apples and oranges with these kids. Honestly, me and my mates turned up in track suit bottoms, t-shirts, I think my mate had a Newcastle top on and we walked in…
>
> Me: …could yous all see it? Was it clear you were different?
>
> Alan: Oh aye, I mean you could literally see these kids looking at us thinking, 'Here's the riff raff'. That's how we felt. We saw it when we walked in.
>
> Me: How did you feel about that?
>
> Alan: Honestly, we started getting…I wouldn't say aggressive but we started playing up to it because you realise you're in a….we weren't ashamed…but we weren't comfortable with it. I think it's insecurity and the insecurity came out like 'we might as well act like Auf Wiedersehen Pet[17]', basically. And we were just like, if we're gonna look the part we might as well act the part as well. So we just took the micky. We passed the course. But made the person who was taking the course's evening probably more complicated that he thought it was going to be. We weren't bad kids. We were out of our comfort zone, totally. I remember walking around outside, looking through the window, me and me mates, fairly confident young lads and saying, 'after you', 'no, you go first' 'no you first'. And there was all these really em…probably the best way I can put it is to say that they looked

[17] Auf Wiedersehen, Pet is a 1980s/90s drama-comedy about a group of unemployed, working class men, including three Geordies, who move to Germany to find work.

like they were already at university. Trendy at the time, yi knaa? The Doc Martens on and everything and I was there in a pair of Nike Air.

Me: Like Pre-students?

Alan: They were. There were essentially students. You couldn't distinguish them from freshers. And I hadn't got to that stage cos I wouldn't have dared dress like a student at Blakelaw, you know, cos I would have got chased out of the place. I was there in a pair of tracksuit bottoms and probably a football top and a pair of trainers and these were there in their Doctor Martens and their band t-shirts and all that. They were almost two three years on from us but they were exactly the same age.

……..

*Sara*

The human and non-human physicality of Sara's accounts of her status as 'the hardest girl in the school' (see chapter 9.3) struck me as I read and listened to her own and her mam's accounts of her educational trajectory holding the notion of intra-action in mind. Her Dad had skills in self-defence/fighting and taught his children how to look after themselves which included their learning how to use the martial arts weapon, nun-chucks. Sara recognised that being 5 foot 2 and 'not a very threatening person' provided an element of protection in terms of her not being seen as a violent trouble-maker by teachers. She identified bad PMT as a factor in her reaction to the girl from a well known 'hard family' who started a fight with her early in the first year at Blakelaw. And she reflected on the difference in being a 'hard' kid then (which might involve pulling hair) and being a hard kid now (which might involve using knives and having them used against you). Sara's clothes and hair (Doc Marten boots, campaigning t-shirts, cornrows and dreads – 'studenty', you might say) marked her out as different to her peers but this wasn't a source of trouble at Blakelaw. When Sara got to the LSE her clothes

mark her out to some of her Gucci suit wearing peers as being different in a different way – lesser, inferior. During this period of her life, her small body and skills in fighting and self-defence cease to have a protective function.

The bodies of Sara's father and maternal grandfather also featured in accounts of her journey from Blakelaw to the LSE:

> Sara's mam: I mean I lived in real poverty, the youngest of seven and, as I've said, I read before I went to school.
>
> Me: And where did that come from in your background then?
>
> Sara's mam: It was my dad….my Dad had TB when he was a child and he was put in a sanatorium and all he could do was read. And everything he learned was from a book. So he was passionate about reading. And I think just to keep us quiet as well.
>
> Sara: I don't think it was that…to keep you quiet. He wasn't formally educated but he was a snob. He had nowt but he had that air of grandeur about him. So he liked to brag. He'd hold court in the pub, a working man's pub about me and my degree and that. It meant something, you know? It was prestigious.
>
> ~
>
> Sara's mam: I'm a compulsive reader.
>
> Me: And your husband? Is he a big reader?
>
> Sara's mam: No, he doesn't really like reading much.
>
> Sara: But that's because…. He joined the forces, he was from a really deprived background and he joined the army as a teenager and it wasn't until he joined the army that they realised he needed glasses. And really badly needed glasses. What's his glasses like?

> Sara's mam: They're really massive. He has to pay to get them thinned down.
>
> Sara: But his eyes are terrible. Even sitting at the front of the class he wouldn't have been able to see the blackboard.

…….

*David*

My brother David described himself on arrival at Blakelaw as 'a super-skinny, weedy, "brainy" kid.' This would have made him vulnerable to being targeted for bullying. Unlike Sara, who was also small, my brother had no experience of fighting when we arrived at Blakelaw. Other children pick up on these things. As I've already told you, we were always well groomed in clean clothes (a protective factor) but we occupied a middling position in terms of the our clothes. I can't remember any of the children who wore branded shoes and sweatshirts ever being bullied. David told me that he was thumped from time to time but no more than anyone else. He was never targeted and does not consider himself to have been bullied. As I told you in chapter 9, when I asked how he'd avoided being bullied he told me:

> By keeping my head down and my mouth shut and not getting categorized as a swot. Sometimes humour, but not with the hardest ones. Sometimes kids that thought they were cool took the mick out of my clothes cos, you know, we didn't have many named brands or anything. But I was just very quiet.

David remembers the positive reaction of a 'hard kid' to the branded school trousers he did wear at one point:

> As you know, clothes-wise we weren't cool kids but Reen [our mam] did go down to Farnon's and got me a couple of pairs of Farrah's when Farrah's were at the height and I remember sitting in the English class and H who was one of the toughest kids in the school and he turned

round and said, ‘Farrah’s. Nice.’ And he wasn’t taking the micky or nothing. He was alright.

…….

The accounts above show how bodies and clothing are part of the intra-active entanglements that came to shape our educational trajectories. Nothing has meaning in and of itself. Sara’s dad’s poor eyesight acts to restrict his engagement with formal education only in its intra-action with other ‘relata’, for example, his economic circumstances and the timing of his education (he is taught during the period when a blackboard positioned at the front of class is the dominant, unquestioned teaching method and before the existence of technology, both ophthalmic and IT based, capable of effectively correcting or compensating for impairments such as poor eyesight. Sara’s grandfather is also physically impaired for a time as a result of tuberculosis. But his illness is part of an intra-action with the dominant medical care regime at the time and the absence of smart phone technology and computer games which produce opportunities to engage with learning through reading. This might well have contributed to the conditions of possibility under which Sara went to university given the love of reading she shared with her grandfather and her mam. Similarly, Sara’s small body works in conjunction with her hormones and her dad’s self-defense training to produce a girl who can look after herself. This gives her time to engage with learning opportunities. Perhaps her gender, itself the product of the intra-active entanglement of bodies and discourse, is relevant too. Being a short, slim girl is acceptable: being a ‘super-skinny, weedy’ boy who does not know how to fight is potentially problematic. David finds another way to use his body as a means of self-protection. He is quiet. He keeps his head down. The entanglement of bodies, culture, practices and time work against David’s engagement with formal learning at that point in his life.

In Alan’s recollection of an uncomfortable encounter clothing and footwear are part of an intra-active entanglement that produces two types of sixth former: the type who is prepared for university and the type who isn’t. Alan’s

account does not suggest that his clothing and footwear choices were deliberate or knowing – he realizes how unprepared he and his friends are when he sees the other sixth formers who are dressed like university students. The football tops and trainers reveal him and his friends as 'riff raff', a perception they then embody by starting to act 'Auf Wiedersehen Pet'. The clothes of the sixth formers can be understood to be agentic in that they act to produce different emotions, perceptions and behaviors – senses of superiority, discomfort or of not fitting in, behaviors associated with 'riff raff' from the West End of Newcastle. The meaning of the clothes is produced within the entanglement of matter, bodies and discourse: clothes here can be seen as texts which are read by others and interpreted independently of any intension on the part of the wearers.

Sara gets away with a clothing style Alan feels he wouldn't have possibly because of her status as 'hardest girl in the school', itself an intra-active entanglement of body, family, hormones, timing, gender, family and cultural context. The entanglement of 'relata' that produce positive opportunities in this environment will cease to function in the same way once she goes to the LSE and the constellation changes.

### 11.3 Redeeming Time

During the mid-80s, when Rob was in his teens, he moved from Leeds to the West End of Newcastle with his mam and his sister and became a pupil at Blakelaw. I have no recollection of us being in school together: Rob was two years younger than me and a frequent truant. The days he did attend school were mainly spent separated from his year group in the 'Scope Unit', a remedial class for children judged to have special educational needs and/or behavioural problems. Rob left school in the late 80s barely able to read and with one qualification, a CSE grade 3 (equivalent to a GCSE grade E) in art. As I've mentioned aready, Rob met his partner Lucy, a sociology graduate, when he was 17. She helped him learn to read and he went on to take an Access to Higher Education course and gained a degree in sociology and social policy a couple of years later. Lucy and Rob became parents when Rob was in his

early 20s. He now works as a clinical auditor in the NHS and recently gained a vocationally focused postgraduate qualification. The couple have four children and still live in the West End of Newcastle.

…….

Rob has agreed to an interview. We've arranged for him to pick me up from my mam's house and drive us to a location of his choice. I want to gain some insight into how a person from an extremely poor background who couldn't read and had criminal career opportunities through family connections ended up going to university and gaining both undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications. And, more than that if I'm honest, how a person from that background became so politically engaged, a vegetarian and a feminist whose children have names no working-class person I know shares.

Do you feel uncomfortable about any of that? Maybe it sounds a little patronising, unethical even, as if I am treating Rob as a psycho-social curiosity? I feel fine about it. I am sensitive to power flows and inequalities so maybe my feeling fine is an indication of the balance that exists between us. As young people, Rob and I lived on the same social housing estate comprising three blocks of Tetris-like buildings each containing around 100 dwellings. My mam still lives there in a 3-bedroomed maisonette identical in layout to the one Rob lived in. Don't assume this means our houses were the same. My mam had a part time job in a department store and my dad managed a warehouse until he was made redundant when I was 15. I suspect that John's mam had very little money at her disposal for things like soft furnishings and new three piece suites.

*Figure 20: Our housing estate, DAR, 2016*

I was a high achiever by Blakelaw standards and Rob was in the remedial unit. He could hardly read when he left school: I went on to Oxford University. But I always knew he was clever. And he was way cooler than me, with his exotic (i.e. Yorkshire) accent, fingerless gloves, gothy black hair and cool taste in music. He was also gentle and, like me, didn't swear. All of this combined to make him an interesting person as far as I was concerned. Maybe we recognised something in one another back then. That neither of us was 'normal'? That neither of us wanted to be 'normal'? Or perhaps an unspoken understanding that being 'normal' was an unrealistic ambition for either one of us. For whatever reason, we liked and respected one another and became friends. I don't feel uncomfortable at all about my desire to find out more about this fascinating person. Rob is a trained and experienced researcher. He knows the score.

When Rob picks me up from my mam's he is wearing a suit and tie and driving a people carrier. Are they still called that? Not having any children myself, I'm unsure. It's so lovely to see him and I want to laugh because we are in the venue of our youth but he looks so grown up whilst I look like a student in my jeans and baseball boots even though I am 46. He drives away from the estate and we chat for a while before I realise that we are listening to a David Bowie CD.

> You still listen to Bowie! I still listen to David Byrne and Talking Heads! I never get bored of them!

I wonder if our respective long-term relationships with our chosen Davids signify a shared identification with interesting oddballs who use their outsider position to produce new ways of seeing and being.

Rob says, 'I know exactly where I want us to do this' and he drives in the direction of the River Tyne. We cross the bridge and arrive at our destination, a canteen in a hospital where he used to work, fifteen minutes later. It's quite noisy and I wonder if my recorder will be good enough to pick out our voices. Rob tells me about things that he thinks made a difference to his

educational trajectory. A kindly teacher who took him to her book filled home to help him with his reading. A wise and loving grandmother. A mother who did her best under difficult circumstances. A father who was less than kind but who he still misses from time to time. And, of course, his partner, Lucy. We also talk about other things: the introduction of an internal market in the NHS, the education system, the value of television as an educator, the role of drama as an awakener of political consciousness, social inequalities in the North East, Victorian Park segregation policies, food, feminism and the kids. When I look at my watch I can't believe that 2 hours have passed. It feels like 20 minutes.

…….

When I replay the recording and listen through headphones on the train back to Cardiff the following day I struggle to hear Rob's soft, low voice over the noise of the cappuccino machine and chatter. I realise that I'm going to have to listen very carefully and repeatedly if I want to transcribe his words verbatim. I also worry that we've spent too much time engrossed in conversation about a whole host of subjects and not enough time talking about Blakelaw and his journey into higher education which is, afterall, the focus of my PhD. This is a risk when you interview an old friend you don't see very often who has views you find interesting and persuasive.

What I don't know at this point is that I'll attend a conference a few months later and people will talk about new materialism and Karen Barad and intra-action. I'll find it intriguing but impenetrable and therefore irritating but eventually the ideas will start to make sense and open up new ways of thinking about and engaging with the world. I'll listen to the recording again and realise that the setting of our conversation, in John's old works canteen, is perfect. I'm going to share some excerpts from the transcripts I made and then I'll explain why.

…….

I ask Rob how he got to this place, this life, via a route that took in the remedial unit at Blakelaw School. I tell him to start the story as far back as he wants to go:

> As far back as I want to go….I can remember my very first day at school. Because I was so intimidated by it….not understanding what knowledge and education were but I became very self-aware that I was different to the other kids at school……Because teaching was a process. You were processed. And you still are processed. You're not educated. If you don't fit in to that you then become that kind of obstruction on the conveyer belt. I was one of those inconvenient obstructions. That was constantly reinforced. So that just knocked my confidence more and more. I started to believe I was stupid. So even the abilities I did have I stopped applying because you thought, well, what can I do? And reading books, like the pirate story, the treasure island books, I was reading those in class when the rest of the class where like four years ahead of that in reading and then having to read in front of the teacher, in front of the class was a bit like being paraded for being thick.

I ask if he felt shown up. It's a stupid question, I think in retrospect, with an obvious answer:

> Yes, I was shown up. It was kind of look at the thick kid in the class. It wasn't education through encouragement and enhancement. It was an abusive kind of education through bullying.

I worry that this conversation might be upsetting for Rob. I'm encouraging him to dredge up and share some pretty unpleasant memories with me. Was there anyone who helped you?, I ask. Anyone who recognised your intelligence? He tells me about a teacher in Leeds, before he came to Newcastle.

> There was Mrs. Meredith. I went round her house for two weeks. The house was full of books. And she probably did more for me in terms of some of the basics than all the previous teachers put together. And that gave me a foundation to get through life.

A house was full of books? I interject. Was that a nice environment to be in for an undiagnosed dyslexic?

> It was. But it was like…I mean I don't read much now because I find reading so tiring. But I'm still fascinated by it. But you explain to other readers who take it for granted, I say well for you, imagine you couldn't see and then suddenly you can. It's kind of that..

Overwhelming?

> Yes. It was overwhelming. It was like looking at stuff that you were excluded from, thinking I wish I could read that. I wish I could read that. I mean the way I explain to adults it's like when you go abroad on holiday and everything is written in a foreign language, well that's what it was like for me. Up until being a teenager, the world I lived in, the world I was born into was like being in a foreign country. I couldn't read it.

Rob tells me about another teacher, a kind, unpatronizing man who used Shakespeare to work with children in the lower sets. But teachers like this were the exception. So Rob started to 'wag off' school – truant – spending his days in Newcastle Central Library:

> The desire was in me to learn but the teachers had no desire to teach. The few who did left, hence I ended up in the 'Scope' Unit, a 'place for childen to go beyond their horizons'. That was the spin used before the concept of spin doctors. But in reality it was the room for the agitators and the kids like me, too thick for school, which was said to me by a few teachers. It was a holding pen for crowd control if you like.

He tells me more about his life inside and outside school. There are good memories – a supportive and wise grandma who taught him lessons in compassion and decency that he's never forgotten – but there are bad ones too. I'm not the sort of person suited to the kind of research where you're supposed to look neutral during an interview. I must have looked worried or concerned or sad because Rob reassures me. 'Hey, I've dealt with this stuff. Don't worry. I'm fine'.

And he really does seem to be fine. I don't get the impression that any of this has 'triggered' him. The conversation turns to the 'discovery' he made about his handwriting – that's how he puts it – when he was still in primary school:

> Rob: I knew my handwriting was already messy and in a short time I realised that this works in my favour. I can be messier. And that way the teachers don't know I can't spell. They just think I'm a messy writer. And I used it, kind of against the system.
>
> Me: So it was a conscious strategy?
>
> Rob: Yeah. I was in primary school and I'd already worked out a strategy for working against the system.
>
> Me: Because it's better to be shown up for having messy handwriting than to be told you're thick?
>
> Rob: Yes, that's exactly what it was.

He tells me that he came across a Blakelaw school report recently in which the teacher had written: 'Rob takes part in class. Unfortunately, I didn't study hieroglyphics in university so I have no idea what he's writing.'

I ask what his handwriting is like these days:

> My handwriting is a mess. But in the NHS you have a lot of doctors who've been educated in private schools. And their handwriting's

appalling. It's not an issue. I've had three separate doctors ask me where I did my medical training, and they were genuine questions based on my handwriting. They assumed I was a doctor. It's not a measure of knowledge here.

…….

We start to talk about Rob's role as a clinical auditor which requires him to see areas of practice that could be improved and to work with staff across the hospital to find ways of making things better for patients. He tells me there's a lot of good will but also a lot of blind spots that result in waste or, at worst, patient harm.

It's not deliberate. It's just not joined up. Because people work in much the same way as you go through education. 'This is what you have to do'. 'These are the subjects you have to do'. 'That's the thing you've got to hit'. And that transfers into life. It transfers into work. 'This is the department I work in'. 'These are my objectives.' They look at everything in silos. And nobody says, let's stand above it all and look at the bigger picture. You could build a dam and have a great supply of water but what about the villages downstream?

I've been reading about dyslexics and their ability to 'see the bigger picture'. I ask if he's always had that ability and if so whether he thinks it has something to do with his dyslexia.

Rob: Yeah, I do. Partly through strategies thinking how am I going to cope with this?

Me: You had to, I suppose.

Rob: Yes, I had to. Things like spending more time in the art department, because I might actually get a qualification in this, so it makes sense I come to this one rather than maths. And then my report says Rob needs to work a bit faster. He works hard but he's taking a

long time to finish things. What he didn't realise was yes, I'm taking a long time to finish things on purpose because the more time I can spend here the less time I have to spend in the maths class, the less time I have to spend in the chemistry class.

Me: So they misread you?

Rob: Totally. I played them, essentially.

Me: So your school reports give an impression, not of you, but of their reading of this boy…and it's a completely unimaginative reading?

Rob: I look at it and I look back and I go, yeah, I know. You can't read my handwriting? Yeah, you're not meant to. I can't spell. I'm messy on purpose. You expected 4 pages of words so you got four pages of mess. Rob needs to work faster? I could work faster but I'm not going to because then I'll have to go to these other lessons.

And I applied that sort of thinking in my jobs. I worked at the civic centre as a student on a 6 month placement in the research department. And the local counsellors would come in for these presentations. And you could tell the ones who were interested because they'd sit at the front of those fancy rooms they have in the civic centre. And then there were the councillors who were obliged to be there, not interested, and they were sat the back with their bloody newspapers and they'd sit and read them! They were that arrogant and that rude. So I said to one of the people who worked there – I was there as a student, I wasn't leading it – I suggested, well the next time we do this, I know we've got the slides at this end and I know we don't have to but can we use the flip chart at the opposite end of the room and in the middle of the session, let's turn the back of the room into the front. And suddenly the arrogant councillors with the newspapers have the rest of the room looking at them. It worked!

…….

After we leave the canteen Rob gives me a lift back to my mam's house and we continue to chat. We talk about the time we formed an experimental pop / performance group with Tony, another alumnus of the Blakelaw Scope remedial unit. It only lasted one evening. I remember catching Rob's eye and I knew then that neither one of us had any idea what we were supposed to be doing. Tony went on to become a circus knife thrower, an actor, a paparazzi photographer, a stand-up comic, a poet, an animator, a film maker and a playwright. We agree that Tony makes both of us look utterly normal and quite dull.

When he drop's me off at my mam's I wave and shout 'See you Rob! Let's not leave it so long next time'. And some children laugh at me and ask why a posh woman is on their estate. I am outraged and tell them I am from here, I grew up here, my mam lives here, but they won't believe me and continue to sneer. I am 13 again but this time I'm not frightened of other children on the estate so I argue with them before telling them to fuck off. As I enter my mam's house and close the door I remember that I'm 46 and that my accent is relatively posh nowadays and I make a note to self that I must learn to act my age at some point.

### 11.4 Analytical insights

Through a Baradian lens, the conditions of possibility under which our educational trajectories took form are dynamic intra-actions incorporating place, bodies, discourse and matter that came to make a difference at various points in time. Thinking with intra-action cannot identify the individual factors that facilitated our going to university because the material ramifications of events and circumstances – being dyslexic, a fight in the playground, a pair of shoes - change over time. When I first started to engage with Barad's thinking, I wondered if paying attention to small differences that come to matter might draw attention away from the 'structural inequalities' that provide a focus for much of the widening participation literature, particularly the impact of socio-economic status. I did not find this to be the case. On the contrary, thinking with Barad enables

us to consider in detail manifestations of economic disadvantage that come to matter as a person's educational trajectory takes form as we can see with Sara's dad's eyes and the things, lack of things and circumstances that come to render them relevant within the context of his own education.

Of all the data I have gathered/made, it's my conversation with Rob for the purposes of my PhD and my subsequent engagement with it (as a recording, a transcript, notes and a memory) that animates the time bending, redemptive force of Barad's notion of intra-action. Rob cannot tell the story of his formal educational trajectory without talking about his work because the two are inseparable. His chosen venues for our conversation – the car journey to and from my mam's house and the hospital canteen – relate to his present and his recent past, both part of an intra-active configuration in which his experience of his formal education has come to make sense. Official records – school reports, the register of attendance, exam results - produce a boy who failed academically in school, a disadvantaged boy, a truant, a low achiever. A different boy is produced in our conversation, a boy who is clever, resourceful and resilient, a boy capable of seeing the bigger picture, a boy with excellent problem-solving skills. We both owe a lot to that boy. The canteen and car journey can be seen to have an agentic role in helping to produce the configuration of childhood, early adulthood, educational and work experiences as we passed buildings and rooms with stories attached to them and drank coffee alongside people involved in the world of work of which he spoke. Rob's dyslexic brain did not function 'normally' in terms of its capacity to meet the requirements of the school system at that time. But his account shows that the very same brain has been advantageous in helping him to think expansively and creatively when his back is against the wall. As a boy, his hands produced writing that, though unacceptable to some teachers, masked his lack of skills in reading and writing. Being 'messy' was better than being 'thick' in that context. A few years later, the same 'bad handwriting', now part of an intra-active entanglement with different discursive and material conditions is read as a sign of medical training and all that that implies.

Why did Rob and I connect, I wonder? Perhaps I read his soft voice, alternative fashion sense and taste in music as a sign of intelligence and character. Would Lucy have found him attractive had he dressed in a more regular way for a Blakelaw boy (football tops and trainers)? Did my own dyslexia, much less severe and disruptive than his but still, to me at this time, significant, have an impact on the quality of our conversation, the way we conducted ourselves, our ease with one another? Who knows. It's a complicated mix. The important thing to note is that I might not have selected Barad as a theorist to think with had it not been for Rob's involvement in the project. It was whilst listening to the recording of our conversation in the canteen that some of Barad's ideas started to make a sense to me and the diffraction patterns that emerged from this experience had an agentic role in shaping my PhD. There are no sharp boundaries between the research subject (Rob), the researcher (me) and the instrument of observation (Barad's theory of intra-action in this case). What is also apparent is that the clever, resilient boy I present to you here would not have come into view had I applied a different set of instruments to measure 'brightness', i.e. those focused on attendance or school performance and/or if Rob and I did not have some shared history.

# CHAPTER 12

## Foucault's Subject

Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are.

*Michel Foucault, The Subject and Power, 1982, p.785*

## 12.1 Purpose of this chapter

This chapter aims to provide the reader with an understanding of Foucault's writing on the subject which will enable them to engage with my attempts to put it to work in chapter 13. In 12.2 I set out Foucault's thinking on the three main mechanisms by which subjects are produced. In 12.3. I reflect on the implications of this thinking for a thesis that focuses on the experiences of a handful of individuals. And in 12.4. I discuss Foucault's take on resistance.

## 12.2 The production of the subject

Michel Foucault wrote against the fixed, essential, self-aware subject, rejecting the idea that people hold within them identities and characteristics that remain stable across time and within different contexts. Foucault postulates that subjects - or 'subject-positions', for Foucault, like Barad and Bourdieu, was a deeply relational thinker - are produced within the flux of complex power relations that constitute and are constituted by culture in conjunction with matter. He identified three 'modes of objectification' that 'transform human beings into subjects' (1982, pp.777–778). Firstly, through the production of 'science' which produces the very subject-positions that scientific inquirers purport to neutrally and objectively study, e.g., the socially disadvantaged, the in/effective teacher, the pupil with special educational needs. From this perspective, that which is claimed as objective knowledge is contingent, produced by, and productive of, the power relations in which subject-positions are created. This is not to deny the weighty materiality associated with some types of knowledge, e.g., that relating to the gender pay gap in the UK, the under-representation of people from certain backgrounds in higher education or the theory of gravity. It is to deny the possibility of neutral, value free knowledge that exists independently of discourse and the complex web of power relations in which we are all positioned.

Secondly, hierarchies, categories and dividing practices (e.g. ability streaming, annual reporting on pupil performance, examinations, school league tables, special educational units) produce a range of subject-positions including high and low-achieving pupils, the successful and the unsuccessful and pupils with challenging behaviour.

The third mode of subject production relates to individuals' recognition of themselves as subjects, e.g. as the working class subject of economic or sociological inquiry, as one of the brightest and best, or as the hardest girl in the school.

Power, knowledge and discourse are central to the operation of all three modes of subject production. Power is not a 'thing' which can be possessed by individuals but rather a 'cluster of relations', multi-directional, dispersed, uncontained, contingent and non-hierarchical (Foucault, 1982). Power relations 'churn out things – subjectivity, discourse, material effects, more power relations' (Jackson, 2013, p. 839). In addition to speech acts and the written word, discourse, as imagined by Foucault, incorporate every day practices, diagrams, grids, sounds and images. Discourses are more than simply signs that designate or refer to things: they 'make persons – we do not speak discourses, discourses speak us' (Ball 2013, p.20) because they are practices that 'systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault, 1972, p. 49).

Policies can be understood to create subjects through the mechanisms described above which work to 'problematize' categories of people (see Bacchi & Goodwin 2016). Power relations flow though the apparatus of school education, producing and produced by discourses and knowledge about schools, neighbourhoods, pupils and teachers, who are subsequently positioned as failing, excellent, poorly performing, let down, challenging, poor, the brightest and best. The term 'bright pupil', then, does not describe the essence of an individual child nor the skills and ability she possesses. A 'bright pupil' is created within a context of discursive practices, material conditions and power relations involving testing and qualification regimes,

notions of good behaviour, assumptions about the purpose of education, the nature of intelligence and the economic system.

Given the dynamic nature of power relations, subject-positions are multiple and unfixed:

> A subject's "boundaries of identity" are not seamless and smooth but disjointed and fragmented because of shifting, interconnected relations of power/knowledge in which the subject is involved and through which the subject is made and makes itself. (Jackson, 2013, p. 840)

This means that a person might identify, and be recognized by others, as clever, able and hard working in one context and lacking in ability and commitment in another. Power, for Foucault, is productive as well as repressive. The same power relations that create a world in which children are prescribed medication to help them deal with examination related anxiety also provide opportunities for them to be acknowledged as hard working and academically successful, which feels good and opens doors in other areas of life.

A few doctoral student colleagues and academics within my department have expressed the opinion that poststructural theory is inadequate for those of us who want to expose and challenge social inequalities because it does not acknowledge the materiality of the world. I have not found this to be the case. Foucault spoke of the 'ponderous, formidable, materiality' of discourse (1981, p.52). His writings are shot through with observations and arguments about bodies and the material world, most obviously in the form of the panopticon in which eyes, real or imagined, watch without being seen and in the regulation of bodies in their expressions of proper and improper sexual desire (Foucault, 1990), both mechanisms in the production of subjects.

A 'Foucauldian' perspective on the subject does not require a denial of the 'real' impact of economic poverty, hormones, neuro-atypical brains or

fighting prowess, nor of the material effects of hierarchical categorizations which manifest as sexism, racism and economic inequality. Subject-positions are not merely 'ideas' that can be easily cast off. The 'cuts' that make the world intelligible by producing an 'order of things' that includes men and women, the academically gifted and intellectually challenged, the privileged and the disadvantaged – are influenced by matter (including bodies) and have material effects (including on bodies). We don't need to believe that sex, gender and social class are inevitable, immutable, essential categories to appreciate that sexism, racism and economic disadvantage have real, material consequences. In this sense ontology and epistemology cannot be sensibly separated.

### 12.3 The subject in the world and the world in the subject

Foucault's ideas around the subject, discourse, power and knowledge provide a dual defence, if one were needed - better to be safe than sorry - against an accusation that this project is self-indulgent. Firstly, as I explained in 4.17, none of us are particularly original because our ways of being in the world and understanding ourselves and others are shaped by the frameworks of meaning that we are born into and raised because 'all subject-positions are "subjected" to discourses that temporarily and ontologically precede them' (Heller 1996, p.94). Secondly, a Foucauldian analysis of the subject and power relations is based on an understanding that 'global and hierarchical structures of domination within a society depend on and operate through more local, low-level, "capillary" circuits of power relationships' (Foucault, 2000, pp. xxiv–xxv). Our recollections about educational trajectories that incorporate 'one of the worst schools in Britain', universities, top firsts and postgraduate qualifications are rooted in, and dependent upon, discourses relating to the purpose of schooling, social class, dis/advantage, intelligence, hard work, capability, aspirations, good jobs and social inequalities. And so, to study the localized conditions of possibility, including subject-positioning, relevant to our trajectories is to

study power relations and discourses that extend beyond our own sense of personal experience.

But hang on a minute. According to Jürgan Habermas:

> from Foucault's perspective, socialized individuals can only be experienced as exemplars, as standardized products of some discourse formation – as individual copies that are mechanically punched out. (Habermas in Heller 1996, p.93)

If Foucault writes against the centred human subject who can speak and act for themselves in favour of a subject who is created within a flux of power-relations and discursive practices, where is the scope for agency? Doesn't that mean it was inevitable that my contributors and I would make it to university and that those who didn't were never going to? Aren't we all trapped?

No. We're not. For Foucault, where there is power, there is also resistance.

### 12.4 Resistance is not futile

Heller (1996) presents criticisms made by several authoritative intellectuals, including Habermas, Nancy Fraser and Anthony Giddens, to the effect that Foucault's theory of the subject leaves no room for agency or resistance: subjects are 'merely power's passive objects' and 'subjectivity that is opposed to the interests of power cannot exist' (p.78).

Heller acknowledges that all Foucault's subjects are:

> equally unfree insofar as their choice of tactics is inevitably mediated by an institutionally-determined linguistic tradition over which they have little, if any, control. Their intentionality, therefore, is never completely their own. (p.91)

However, he also provides ample evidence from Foucault's own writings and interviews of his insistence that resistance to the processes of subjectification is possible. For example:

> Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free. By this we mean individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments, may be realized. Where the determining factors saturate the whole, there is no relationship of power; slavery is not a power relationship when man is in chains. ((Foucault, 1982)

And again:

> I'm very careful to get a grip on the actual mechanisms of the exercise of power; I do this because those who are enmeshed, involved, in these power relations can, in their actions, their resistance, their rebellion, escape them, transform them, in a word, cease being submissive. And if I don't ever say what must be done, it isn't because I believe that there's nothing to be done; on the contrary, it is because I think that there are a thousand things to do, to invent, to forge, on the part of those who, recognizing the relations of power in which they're implicated, have decided to resist or escape them. (Foucault 1991, p.174

And, paradoxically:

> Power relations are both intentional and non-subjective. (Foucault, 1990, p. 94)

Heller rejects the suggestion that Foucault's notion of discourse leaves only hegemonic subjects in its wake (i.e. subjects that simply reflect or act within the confines of the subject-positions created by and reflected in dominant discourses):

> On the contrary; although all subject-positions are "subjected" to discourses that temporarily and ontologically precede them, the inevitable multiplicity of those discourses ensures that subjectification invariably produces structurally incompatible (i.e. hegemonic and counter-hegemonic) subject-positions. (Heller 1996, p.94)

Resistance for Foucault, argues Heller, is not only possible, it is inevitable:

> Because subjectification necessarily produces subject-positions with irreconcilable material and symbolic interests, the power exercised by subject-position X will always be opposed by subject-position Y ($Y_1$, $Y_2$,…$Y_n$). Hence there can never be a social formation in which only "power" is present. (Heller, 1996, p. 99)

I find Heller's defence of Foucault's conceptualisation of subjectivity, power and resistance convincing. But if I'm honest, I do not feel qualified to judge the water-tightness of Foucault's reasoning. Given the intellectual stature of the critics Heller cites, it seems unlikely that their conclusions are the result of careless reading: there might well be some 'loopholes' in Foucault's ideas from an analytical philosophical point of view. And even I can see that his assertion that slavery is not a power relation is uncomfortably problematic. However, this is, perhaps, to evaluate Foucault's ideas according to inappropriate criteria. His essay on Power and the Subject (1982, p.777) begins with the following statement:

> The ideas which I would like to discuss here represent neither a theory nor a methodology.

Foucault's aim, it would appear, was not the production of philosophical concepts but the facilitation of the transformation of himself and others:

> I don't construct my analyses in order to say, "This is the way things are, you are trapped." I say these things only insofar as I believe it enables us to transform them. Everything I do is done with the conviction that it may be of use. (Foucault 2000, p.294-5)

To expect Foucault to have remained a fixed, stable subject who produced fixed, stable writing over his professional career seems a little perverse since he thought this neither possible nor desirable:

> [W]hen people say, "Well, you thought this a few years ago and now you say something else," my answer is ... [Laughs] "Well, do you think I have worked like that all those years to say the same thing and not to be changed?" This transformation of one's self by one's own knowledge is, I think, something rather close to the aesthetic experience. Why should a painter work if he is not transformed by his own painting? (Foucault 1991, p. 131)

My interest is in the *effect* of thinking with Foucault's ideas about the subject. I want to explore how this thought-lens helps me and others to be-do-live differently.

Importantly, resistance does not simply involve the inhabiting of counter-hegemonic subject-positions. Anti-hegemonic positions are not necessarily more straightforwardly 'good' or 'true'. Power relations are everywhere:

> My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism. (Foucault, 1994, p.256)

Hegemonic positions can be productive and counter-hegemonic positions can be restrictive. To look at the world through the lens of Foucault's Subject requires us to be vigilant. We must resist the temptation to elevate stories of underdogs heroically standing up to 'the system' as truer than stories that reflect dominant discourses.

# Chapter 9

# Thinking with Foucault's Subject

*I don't feel that it is necessary to know exactly what I am. The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning. If you knew when you began a book what you would say at the end, do you think that you would have the courage to write it? What is true for writing and for a love relationship is true also for life.*

Truth, Power, Self: An Interview with Michel Foucault, October 25th, 1982 (1988)

## 13.1 Purpose of the chapter

In this chapter I think with Foucault's ideas about the subject to consider opportunities and restrictions flowing from processes of subjectification potentially pertinent to our educational trajectories. In 13.2 I present a range of materials that produce Blakelaw as a 'failing school' that needs to be saved. In 13.3 I present materials that resist this subject position by producing Blakelaw as a vibrant school in which teachers, parents and pupils are strong and self-sufficient. In both sections I have layered a range of materials, set out chronologically, without a great deal of comment. I hope that as you hold the ideas from the last chapter in mind as you read you'll see how they function to produce Blakelaw as a complex, multi-bodied subject. In 13.4 I consider the how the positioning of my contributors and I as subjects within and as part of Blakelaw School may have facilitated and/or hindered our journeys into higher education. In 13.5 I consider some analytical insights produced by my thinking with Foucault in this chapter.

I used the following question to guide my thinking in this chapter.

> *How can the subjectification of Blakelaw School, and resistance to the same, be seen to have facilitated and hindered our educational journeys into university?*

## 13.2 Blakelaw, the failing school

*Contributor memories*

My brother David's recollections of the Blakelaw learning experience were largely negative:

> The years at Blakelaw for me were definitely about self-survival. I never had any feeling that I was learning at all or even that going to school was to achieve that. It was very much about survival. Staying out of the way of certain people. And having a laugh - it wasn't completely miserable all the time. But it was like teachers were security guards…

> that was the overall feeling. I never felt at all that learning and knowledge were advancing. Ever. Every lesson was a survival exercise for the teacher as well.

With the exception of one English teacher who used Shakespeare to work with children in the lower set, Rob does not recall feeling supported or encouraged in school:

> I went to the central library when I wagged off[18] school. The desire was in me to learn but the teachers had no desire to teach. The few who did left, hence I ended up in the 'Scope' Unit, a 'place for kids to go beyond their horizons'. That was the spin used before the concept of spin doctors. But in reality it was the room for the agitators and the kids like me, too thick for school, which was said to me by a few teachers. It was a holding pen for crowd control if you like.

…….

*Newspaper coverage of Blakelaw School 'pupil protest' / 'school strike' / 'mass truancy, circa 1994*

Sara told me about her involvement in what she called the 'school strike' while she was a pupil at Blakelaw. Here is an excerpt from her email:

> I was involved in many campaigns for free education (anti-tuition fees and against cuts in education). I think it was 1994 and the NUS were having a day of strike action at Newcastle Uni with a rally at the Monument[19]. ….. I decided to take the school out of strike and march to the Monument to meet up with the uni students and join the rally…. It was in the Chronicle (local newspaper) and on Look North (BBC

[18] 'Wagged off' is Geordie for truanted.

[19] Grey's Monument in the centre of Newcastle is a place where activists of various causes gather to campaign.

regional news TV programme) and they labelled Blakelaw 'Schools for Skivers'. Labelled it a mass truancy?!? Rather than a protest.

I've been unable to track down the Look North programme but here is an excerpt from a newspaper report about the events:

> "Blakelaw headmaster Jeffrey Curd called the protest "misguided" and claimed it was likely adults were involved in the planning. He said "This incident was misguided. These pupils - some of them in year 11, where examinations are important – have missed a whole day of school. Not only has it been potentially dangerous with young children crossing busy roads but it has marred the reputation of the school."

…….

*Figure 21: Sara and John Prescott, 1995 © Trinity Mirror / Alamy Stock Photo*

John Prescott, then Deputy Leader of the Labour party, visited Blakelaw in January 1995. I found this photograph on a stock photography website. It appears to have been owned by the Daily Mirror national newspaper but I haven't found a corresponding report.  Having bought and downloaded the image I realised that the girl engaging with Prescott is my contributor, Sara.

Why did Prescott visit Blakelaw in the year before the general election? Why is Sara in the photo? Could it have something to do with the subject positions of both school and child at that time: 'failing school' and example of a 'bright child' from a 'disadvantaged background who is 'being failed'?

*Published performance indicators*

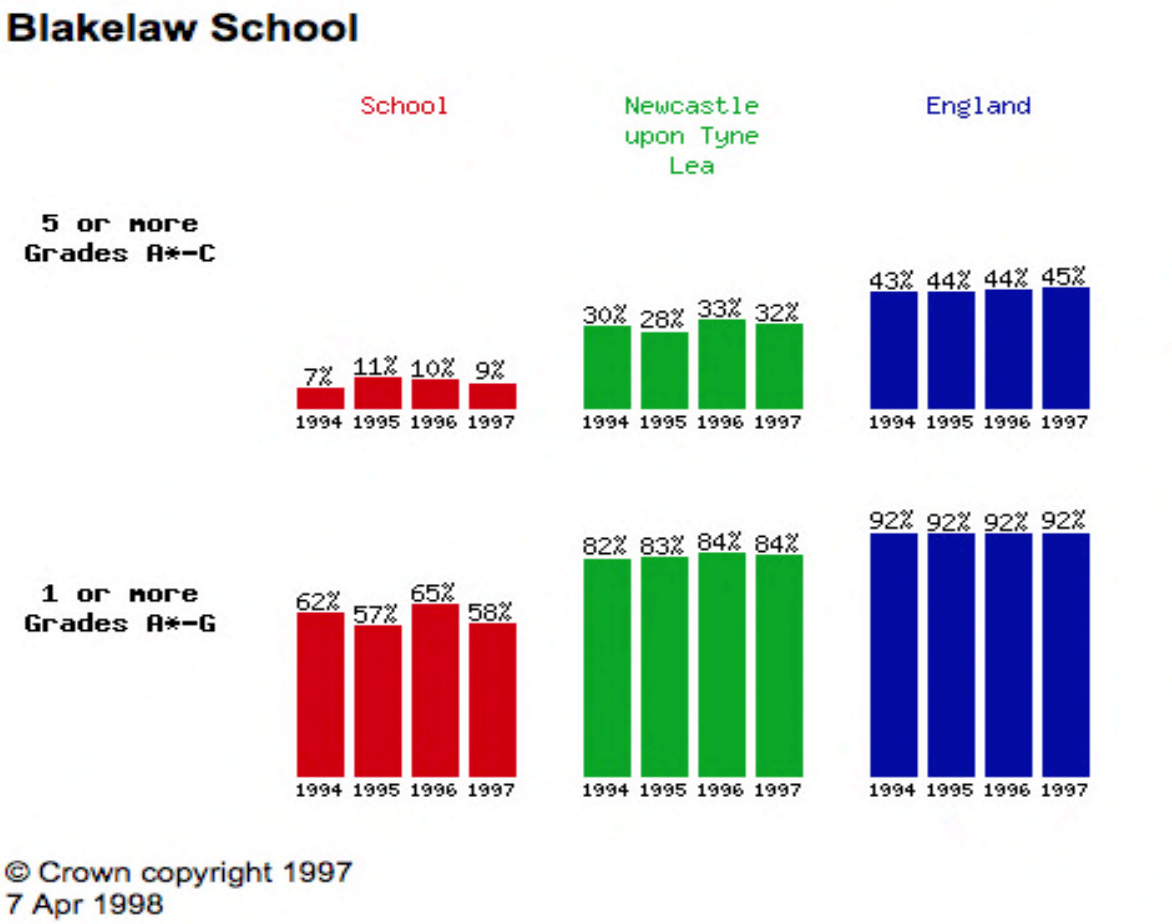



*Figure 22: Screenshot of online GCSE Performance indicators, 1994 – 1997, (Department for Education 1997)*

I grabbed this screenshot from the Government's National Archives website in 2015. Performance data of this sort is no longer available online.

…….

*1996 Ofsted report*

An Ofsted report published in 1996 introduces Blakelaw as an 'inner-city, mixed, 11 to 18 comprehensive secondary school, with a very small sixth form':

> The vast majority of pupils are white with few from ethnic minority backgrounds. Many pupils are socially disadvantaged or have learning difficulties. While the intake includes pupils of all abilities, the majority are of average or below average ability. Approximately 90 per cent of the present Year 7 intake have reading ages below their chronological age. Five pupils (approximately 1 per cent) have statements of special educational need and the school has further identified approximately half of all the pupils as in need of some additional support. Fifty-four per cent of the pupils are registered to receive free school meals. (OFSTED, 1996, para. 1)

There were 1,131 pupils on the roll in 1974 (H.M. Inspectors, 1974). The 1996 Ofsted report indicates that the number has fallen to 560 by then, perhaps because:

> many parents of more able children who live in these communities choose to send their children to other secondary schools in, and to a lesser extent outside, the city. (OFSTED 1996, para.1)

Things are not looking good for Blakelaw at this point. When pupils enter the school in Year 7, their 'standards of achievement' are 'well below average' (para 8):

> Approximately 88 per cent of the pupils have a reading age below their chronological age, and 17 per cent have a reading age below 8. A recent LEA audit identified 40 per cent of the school's population as in need of learning support. (para 18)

In the view of the inspectors:

the school does little to counteract this weakness and few measures are taken to improve the pupils' reading skills or to raise their levels of oracy, literacy and numeracy across the curriculum. (para 8)

The inspectors are critical of the school, citing a number of failings and weaknesses. For example:

- standards of achievement were unsatisfactory or poor in half the lessons; there is significant under-achievement across both key stages. external examination results are poor;
- the quality of teaching is variable; too often it is unsatisfactory. Many teachers have low expectations of their pupils, particularly those pupils of average or low ability;
- the pupils' ability to learn is hampered by a lack of learning skills and there is neither a coherent nor co-ordinated school policy to guide all teachers in improving the pupils' literacy and numeracy;
- a significant number of pupils have special educational needs, particularly in literacy and numeracy; there is too little support for these pupils;
- the senior management team is ineffective. The governing body has failed to fulfil its statutory obligations and the school is not well led. Many staff are disenchanted and have lost confidence in the headteacher. Budgetary planning is unsound and the school provides poor value for money;
- attendance is poor and hinders pupils' progress.
- pupils are reluctant communicators, their speaking skills are unsatisfactory and too often their responses are limited to curt phrases. Conversation with their peers is similarly constrained. They are not performing well, bodily.

The inspectors are also of the opinion that relationships between teachers and pupils are mostly good, that behaviour in classrooms and around the school is generally satisfactory or good and that pupils listen to instructions and understand much of what is said.

But it isn't enough:

> In accordance with Section 207 (1) of the Education Act 1993, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools is of the opinion that the school is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and it requires special measures. (para 5)

…….

*A quote from the Labour Party Manifesto ahead of the 1997 general election*

'Some things the Conservatives got right. We will not change them'

(British Labour Party 1997, p.3)

…….

*A New Labour Government is elected in 1997, Blakelaw is 'named and shamed' and subsequently given a 'Fresh Start'.*

Within three weeks of taking power in 1997 the New Labour Government publishes the names of 18 schools it regards as the worst in the country. Blakelaw is amongst them.

~

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment published a White Paper detailing the Government's plans regarding the raising of standards in schools:

> Schools which have been found to be failing will have to improve, make a fresh start, or close. The principle of zero tolerance will also apply to local education authorities. Our policy will be driven by our recognition that children only get one chance. We intend to create an education service in which every school is either excellent, improving or both.

> There are currently 300 schools in England which have been identified by OFSTED as failing to deliver an acceptable education. Some are well supported by their LEA and are showing substantial signs of recovery. However, where schools show insufficient evidence of recovery it may be necessary to consider a "Fresh Start".
>
> A fresh start may take different forms….. [One] option would be to close the school, and re-open on the same or a different site with a new name and new management. The change would have to be more than superficial. It would need professional leadership of the highest calibre and would need to be seen by everyone as a clean break, and an attempt to create a new and ambitious sense of purpose. (Blunkett July 1997)

~

The national press started to take an interest in Blakelaw and the other ‘failing schools’:

> David Blunkett, the Secretary of State for Education, said yesterday that `naming and shaming' poor schools works and he was prepared to do it again. Mr Blunkett dismissed the reaction from teachers' unions. "We are talking about giving people simple basic facts about the state of education at their children's schools. It is a moral matter. Some people know about their children's schools and some don't. If they know, they remove their children."
>
> Jean Millham, head of Morningside primary school in Hackney, east London, which has improved so much that it has been given a clean bill of health, said she would never forgive the Government for upsetting children at the school on the day it published the list. The school had been improving long before the naming and shaming happened. "It just knocked everyone back and hurt parents, children

and teachers. I hope they will learn this is not the way to do it," she said.

However, Russ Wallace, head of Blakelaw school in Newcastle, said the school had been spurred into action and would reopen with a new name and refurbished buildings next September under the Government's "fresh start" proposals. William Atkinson, head of the Phoenix School given a fresh start by the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham and sent to Blakelaw by the Government, "has been a driving force in the work we have done", Mr Wallace said. The school had introduced new literacy programmes and had formed links with well-known companies to design a curriculum relevant to the world of work. There may be some staff changes. Mr Wallace, who is on a temporary contract, will himself be applying for a job.

(Excerpt from E*ducation: Blunkett says 'naming and shaming' bad schools works*, Judd, The Independent, 11 November 1997)

~

The F word is taboo at Firfield Community school in Newcastle. Failing is what happened at Blakelaw Comprehensive, which had one of the worst, if not the worst, attendance and GCSE records in the country. But now the school has a new name, a new headteacher and is the guinea-pig for the government's 'fresh start' programme. So failing is off-message. Instead we have challenges and opportunities, financial investment and a firm belief that every child can be saved.

(Excerpt from *A school with no easy fix,* Crace, The Guardian 1999)

.....

*'Changing the attitudes of the people of the West End of Newcastle' - images and transcript excerpts from a Channel Four documentary*

A six-part documentary about Blakelaw's 'Fresh Start' entitled 'Making the Grade' aired on Channel Four in winter 1999 (Screen Ocean, 1999). The production company kindly agreed to send me hyperlinks to 4 of the episodes. The opening titles are accompanied by sinister music and an alarm that reminded me of the 'patient escape' warning sound at Broadmoor Special Hospital where I did a social work training placement in the 90s. Abstracted monochrome images of tower blocks, the Tyne Bridge and the Angel of the North (which is in Gateshead, not Newcastle) are interspersed with images of corridors, empty classrooms, teachers and pupils running, fighting and writing. The ghostly voice of a teacher saying "Don't talk" brings the sequence to a close. We then move on to images of a deserted playground, a smashed-up car and a fence with anti-climb spikes. 'Gritty' Northern actor Christopher Ecclestone[20] provides the voice over:

> "The worst school in Britain. The ultimate challenge for a government that insists that raising educational standards is its top priority. Pupils come from two estates in Newcastle. From an area of long-term unemployment, black economy, hard drugs, broken homes."

We learn that Carol McAlpine has been appointed as the school's 'super-head'. Carol talks to camera as she walks down a corridor past a broken window and peeling paint as brown water drips from cracks in the ceiling. She tells us about the old Blakelaw School:

> "It was at the bottom of the list of league tables. It was right at the very bottom. It had the poorest attendance figures, it had the poorest number of GCSEs per youngster, it had highest number of youngsters leaving school without any qualifications at all. It was really at the bottom of the heap and something had to be done about it."

[20] Christopher Ecclestone is from the North West, not the North East, but we won't quibble.

Carol's been given an extra £2.5 million to sort the school out, Christopher explains, but in return she has to deliver:

> She's got to convince more parents to send their children to the school, she's got to cut truancy and absenteeism and she's got to improve results in key areas: literacy, numeracy and GCSE passes. She's got 5 years to meet the targets, aware that the most powerful figures in British education will be scrutinising her every move.

~

This will be one hell of a task. But, as Carol tells the then Minister of State for Schools, Estelle Morris, her last school was "the same as this one and I turned it around".

~

*Figure 23: Fresh Start 'Superhead' - Still from Episode 2, Making the Grade, Channel Four, (Screen Ocean 1999)*

Carol is driving her car. ‘Are you ruthless?’, the interviewer asks. ‘Yes’, replies Carol:

> “At the end of the day, I’m ruthless. And if there’s something I want to get I will go out to get it in a ruthless way. No matter what. And if someone sets themselves against me, woe betide them.”

Carol is the potential saviour of this school. She will save us from those who let us down. Including ourselves:

> “Remember, we’re talking about youngsters who don’t want to attend school. They don’t see the point of coming to school. Their parents don’t really value education. Education maybe did them a disservice in the past. They maybe haven’t worked. We really want to change the outlook to education of the whole of this area. There’s no quick fix. We can’t do it in two years but it’s something which, over the course of five, six years, we hope we can change the attitudes of the people in the West End of Newcastle.”

…….

*Carol resigns*

Not long after the programme airs the BBC reports that Carol resigns:

> The head teacher of a high profile "fresh start" school, which is tackling truancy by paying pupils to attend lessons, has resigned. Carol McAlpine, head teacher at Firfield Community School in Newcastle upon Tyne, is the second "superhead" to resign in less than a week. [….] Firfield Community School, in a deprived area of Newcastle, was formerly Blakelaw comprehensive school. […..] It featured in a Channel 4 television documentary last year, which revealed that a number of "serial" truants had been removed from the school roll, with their parents agreeing to educate them at home.

[….]

Newcastle education authority has paid tribute to Ms McAlpine's work, saying that "improvements have been made to the learning environment in a very short period of time".

But it has emerged that industrial action by teachers was only narrowly averted earlier this year when staff refused to teach disruptive pupils. Nigel de Gruchy, general secretary of the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers, revealed he had been on the verge of a visit to the school six weeks ago before problems were resolved locally.

The LEA [Local Education Authority] has also made it clear the school still faces severe difficulties, and the prospect of staff cuts. […..] Extra funding as part of the fresh start programme depended on the school becoming full within three years. This "ambitious target" had not been met and extra cash had not materialised. Consequently, the school would have to lose a senior member of staff and a classroom teacher in September. […..]
Mr de Gruchy said the government's "fresh start" policy was dogged by its targets to reduce exclusions from school, and the "culture of blaming teachers" which it encouraged. "The reality is becoming clear that even with brilliant heads and staff, these schools do not succeed," he said. The fault lies not with the teachers but with the kind of children that attend these schools. One or two disruptive children and the school can cope, a whole school-full and it has no chance."

But a government spokesman said no-one had ever pretended that fresh start would provide a "quick fix". [……] The thing to remember is that in these schools, all the other alternatives

> have been tried. There is no alternative, other than to close the school and disperse the children or see a continued drift into failure." (Second 'superhead' moves on, BBC online, 2000)

…….

*Blakelaw / Firfield closes for good – excerpts from newspaper coverage*

The eventual closure of the school in 2002 was covered in the national press:

> The country's first Fresh Start school is to close this summer, a year earlier than planned, after parents voted for their children to be moved. Firfield school in Newcastle was created in 1998 from the former Blakelaw comprehensive. But it has made little progress and is to be closed - along with West Denton high school - and replaced by a new church school, All Saints College. Only 4 per cent of Firfield pupils achieved five or more A* to C grades at GCSE in 2000. (Times Education Supplement, 2002)

…….

You'll remember that Foucault theorised that subjects are produced in three ways: through the production and circulation of knowledge that creates the objects of its own study; through dividing and categorisation practices; and in the subject's recognition of themselves as a subject. All three mechanisms come into play within the context of the production of government policy. Blakelaw is produced as a failing school through its 'naming and shaming' as such, it's fulfilment of criteria set out in various policies and the OFSTED inspection regime and in two head teachers' acknowledgement of its failings, all of which determine what makes the cut, what counts and what is to be discarded as irrelevant. Exam results matter: good relationships between teachers and children who struggle to achieve learning milestones, unless they result in good exam results, do not.

The Blakelaw as failure discourse incorporates a number of 'takes' on what is wrong, who is to blame and what needs to be done to address the problem: poor teaching and leadership; bad policies; parents who do not care about education; the run down and dysfunctional neighbourhood in which the school is located; the children themselves who are disruptive and 'below average'. This is a school that needs to be saved: by David Blunkett's 'zero tolerance' policies; by Carol McAlpine, the superhead; by William Atkinson, the head of a fresh start school that has successfully turned itself around.

## 13.3 Resistance to Blakelaw as a failing school in the production of Blakelaw as a thriving school

*H.M Inspectors Report*

The earliest official document relating to Blakelaw School that I was able to get hold of is school inspection report published in 1974 and held in the National Archives (H.M. Inspectors, 1974). Like contemporary Ofsted reports it provides a description of the school and an assessment of its strengths and weaknesses. But there are differences too. The report does not apply a grading system. And it uses a prose style rather than bullet points. It has a personal quality that leaves the reader in no doubt that a human or humans wrote it following interaction with pupils, teachers, buildings and equipment.

In an introductory section entitled, *The nature and circumstances of the school,* the authors explains that:

> the catchment areas of the school consists basically of 2 large council estates to which some problem families have been moved from other parts of the city. The social conditions thus act as a limiting factor on the 'comprehensiveness' of the intake. This is borne out by data supplied by the Head of the Remedial Department derived from an NFER non-verbal assessment. Out of a first year total of 181 pupils, 113 scored below 100 IQ. (p.1)

The inspectors express concerns relating to the location of the school in three unconnected buildings and the inadequacy of facilities but praise the school for 'making the best of a difficult situation':

> the school has encouraged the notion that the lower school is a small community where pupils can more easily accustom themselves to the changed educational world they have encountered after leaving primary school. HM Inspectors were impressed by the success that has so far been achieved and by the genuine sense of community spirit that they encountered on their visits to the lower school. (p.10)

I have read several contemporary secondary school OFSTED reports that make little or no mention of arts and music education. The 1974 report has a three-page arts and crafts section in which the authors reflect on the work displayed across the school. There is no positioning of art education and practice as less important or something 'other' than an academic subject. I find the language surprising in its subtly and intelligence.

> A great deal of art work is displayed on both sites. A particularly effective group, mounted to illustrate the expressive qualities inherent in the distortion of form, suggest a little less quantity concentrated to communicate ideas and experiences would add to the value of the displays. [……] It was both pleasant and exciting to observe some of the very sensitive and controlled work in progress where the teacher was making effective use of reference material and drawing out each child's assessment of his own and others' forms involved. (p. 17)

Might the school's strengths in art education have had something to do with the success of the artist Michael Dean, Goldsmith graduate and Turner Prize nominee in 2016, who was a pupil at Blakelaw in the late 80s and early 90s, I wonder?

The general tone of the 1974 report is positive:

> The sixth form pupils were mature and poised, and on one occasion acted as hosts to HM Inspectors at a private tea; the occasion was excellently managed and successful. (p. 11)

And in geography:

> There is a pleasing insistence on high standards to which the youngsters respond. […] It was a sheer joy to see 13 barely average children clamour to stay in during break on a sunny day because they really did want to get on with their work. (p. 22)

The inspectors do identify a number of problems. For example, 'the general standard of oracy was not high' and the planned 'remedial studies' curriculum had yet to be implemented 'owing to lack of experienced staff'.

> There is also the problem of the brighter child from the unsupportive home. In the interests of raising standards and being fair to the more able the department is seriously considering setting [ability streaming] in the lower school.

However, they contextualise Blakelaw's performance as follows:

> The school has had to face a number of serious problems; operating on a split site in three separate buildings, limited catchment area, high staff turnover. Yet, in spite of these difficulties HM Inspectors felt that the school was developing as an organisation which was beginning to show valuable results. It was also felt that there were many interesting growing points and enthusiasms which pointed to stimulating future developments, all of which reflect very creditably on staff, both academic and ancillary, and on the quality of leadership. (p.14)

…….

*Dorothy Heathcote visits Blakelaw*

Dorothy Heathcote was a famous educationalist who came to Blakelaw to work with a group of 'mixed ability' pupils in the early 1980s. I had no idea she was famous until I started researching this project. It was only then, in discussions with doctoral students with a background in teaching, that I realised I'd been part of something significant. Whilst working at Newcastle University, Dorothy invented a dramatic-inquiry based approach to teaching and learning called 'The Mantle of the Expert'. The main thrust of the approach involves children working as if they are a group of experts[21]. My memories of working with Dorothy are sketchy – I was only 12 at the time. I remembered the thrust of the dramas we worked on, the first involving the Minemata Bay mercury poisoning disaster, the second worsening conditions for workers in a fictional factory.

I looked for evidence of Heathcote's work online and found many examples, though none relating to Blakelaw. Here is an example of a documentary about her life and methods called *Three Looms Waiting*.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f5jBNIEQrZs

'Drama', Heathcote tells the interviewer, 'is not about wearing a leotard and pretending to be a tree. 'Drama is a real man in a mess'.

In one scene a teacher describes his initial reaction to Dorothy's theory:

> I said, I think these ideas of yours may work with intelligent children but I can't see them working with the kind of children I've got to teach. And she smiled, extremely patiently and said something like, you want a bet? And so I said, well I don't mind betting.

[21] You can read more about The Mantle of the Expert here if you're interested:
https://www.mantleoftheexpert.com/what-is-moe/

Dorothy continues the story:

> And he had this fantastic confrontation which shook him rigid. He rang me up and said, 'Come down. It's worked!'. And there they were, arguing about why the bear trap that had been dug for the white man should have killed one of their own princes. And the first written work I saw from these children, these deprived children, you felt they've only just got shoes, was this sorrowing for their young prince, this young brave who was the cream of the tribe.

I find the scene arresting and moving.

Later, whilst searching for something else, I discover that Newcastle University had a copy of the Heathcote / Blakelaw project, a teacher training video entitled 'Teaching Political Awareness Through Drama' (Heathcote, 1981). There were no smart phones in my youth and no-one I knew had a cine camera. I have not seen a moving image of my young self until today when a DVD copy of the film arrives. I am 47. The experience is unnerving, not because I look and am so much older now but because I instantly recognised that child and remember how she felt during the workshops. Dorothy tells the children:

> You don't have to pretend anything. We're not in the pretending game. We're in the truth game. Right?

How Brechtian, I think, momentarily, before becoming absorbed once more. The children are quiet, focused, serious. It's nothing like my memories of regular classes at Blakelaw. Some fisher women and men (children) are sick and in pain. Those who are strong enough visit the factory owner (Dorothy) to ask for help. She is cold hearted, disinterested. Some of the children seem to understand exactly what it required of them. Not consciously. They are far too embroiled in the action to think about what a teacher might expect of them.

> 'Wi need doctors! People are dying and wi need doctors, man!!'

They are angry, determined, brave. They shine. Not me, though. I am tentative, shy, awkward, quiet. I barely speak. The children who shine are the

*Figure 24: Still from 'Teaching Political Awareness Through Drama' (Heathcote, 1981). I am the tall girl to the left of the frame*

'less able' of our mixed ability group. I remember, and I can see when I watch the DVD now, how Dorothy loved these children, mainly boys from poorer backgrounds. At this time, in this space, they, not I, are the brightest and best.

…….

*Blakelaw as a preparer of young people for work*

Like David, Rob and me, Alan was a pupil at Blakelaw before the publication of the first performance indicators in 1994. When I asked him to reflect on his transition from school to university he spoke of his realisation that

Blakelaw was not preparing its pupils for university like other schools. He recalls his mum coming in from her work as an administrator in a university as asking:

> Have you had this? Have you had that? Have you talked to such and such? Cos these other schools would do outreach to universities and things like that. I came to realise that, hang on, this place isn't really set up to drive you at that age.
>
> In hindsight I would say that, for the half dozen bright kids in my year who wanted to get A-levels, we'd probably have been better off going to college. I remember that there was no real sixth form (they more or less created one for us) and appointed teachers for the A-level classes.

Alan concluded, not that Blakelaw was a 'bad school' but that it just wasn't set up to get pupils into university:

> Blakelaw was geared up for what it was - a West End school aimed at getting kids through & out into work. It wasn't a university factory as I would imagine somewhere like the Royal Grammar School is, and we left without any of the preparation that I've since heard kids in 'better' schools get.

This interpretation chimes with David's account of his entry into the job market:

> It happened through the school. I was very lucky given that I had one GCSE at grade C. I started in the sixth form doing what was called a 'certificate in pre-vocational education'. [He laughs] …. It was for people like me, not deemed to be academic – like JB, although he is an accountant now. [He laughs again.] AJ was on it. He became a dancer. It was for people who had nothing to go to but who wouldn't have relished signing on at 16. So I started that because I'd got these crap results and I wasn't going to walk into a job or a good apprenticeship…. And I'm not sure how it worked. It must have been a

background process but I had a letter saying I had an interview for a youth training scheme at the Department for Health and Social Security. I hadn't applied for that. Someone had done it on my behalf….and they were really nice at the interview. They phoned up on the Friday when I was watching Roland Rat [we both laugh] and I started the YTS on the Monday. It was £30 a week pocket money. That's how I saw it. It was brilliant. Exactly the same thing happened to CS [his best friend].

*'He made them believe in themselves.'*

In the interview transcript excerpt below, Sara's mam reflects on one of Blakelaw's strengths as a school:

> The teachers at Blakelaw where quite passionate….There was the PE teacher with my son. He took the kids from that school – and bear in mind some of them didn't even have trainers, they were that poor – and it was a bit like, you know when you get these cheesy films on telly and it's a run down school and they take them to the Olympics and they win everything? It was a bit like that. He took them to Gateshead Athletics Stadium. They'd barely trained and they were winning everything. He was so passionate. He knew what kids were good at. It was absolutely amazing. He really believed in the kids. But he didn't just believe in the kids. He made them believe in themselves.
>
> My son was good at sport and he was pushed…. they picked what he was good at and encouraged him.

…….

*The teachers raise funds to send Sara on the experience of a life-time*

Here Sara talks about the school's facilitation of an experience of a life-time. You've read this before in 9.4 as an example of a chance occurrence that

came to make a difference. Here I present it as material that works to resist Blakelaw's subjectification as a bad school:

> My form teacher was my History teacher Mr B. He knew my politics and interests, I was active in the Anti-Nazi League and anti-Racism campaigns. He had received information about a North American Indian Project set up by two North East teachers. Once the American West was brought into the GCSE History curriculum there were many complaints about the lack of historical accuracy. Most of the text books were based on white settlers views, portrayed all Native Americans as nomadic, called teepees, wigwams (wooden logs) and women Squaws (translation – vaginas). So a project had been set up with the aim to place English kids on a range of reservations, to develop GCSE resource materials for use in GCSE History classes and deliver teacher training. Mr B put me forward. After an interview process I was selected as one of four students to go live on an Oglala Lakota Sioux Reservation in South Dakota. I was 14. I went for the summer, lived with a family, went to high school, had to interview community members etc. The other students were all very well off, I later learned I was chosen as the 'poor kid' so they had good representation! Ha! We had to fund raise for the project to go ahead. We wrote to businesses for corporate sponsorships, did fundraisers etc. The school knew my family would never be able to afford it! My parents were really active but had no money. The staff at the school were amazing put on race nights, did raffles – went out of the way to help me get my share to go! Mr B took me out for a pizza before I went to have a chat and see how I was feeling and gave me a little bit of spending money. I used it to get things to bring back for him. I bought things for some of the other staff too – Mrs S had a poster of Black Foot proudly hanging on the office wall!

*The 'school strike', 1994*

I asked all my contributors to email me and tell me about three powerful memories from their time at Blakelaw that might have had an impact on their educational trajectories. The 'school strike' was one of Sara's. This memory related to her role in organising a march from Blakelaw to join a NUS rally against tuition fees and cuts in education:

> I had discussions with people at school and my friends [in neighbouring schools] and we each tried to mobilise our schools out. We didn't let the teachers know as we knew they would stop it! But as students we met made banners and placards etc. We met at the school gates in the morning – we had a big group and the teachers started to panic. They sent Mr B out and an art teacher who I also had a good relationship to talk to me. I'd already said to everyone as soon as the teachers come out we start marching into town – they will just try and stop us. So over a hundred of us went, we went past Rutherford and ended up at monument and joined the rally. It was in the Chronicle and on Look North and they labelled Blakelaw 'Schools for Skivers'. The labelled it a mass truancy?!? Rather than a protest. They debated excluding me from school afterwards. Some staff, Mr B included, would never speak to me again! Others privately said they thought it was great that we took a stand. Other pupils told the head teacher that if they expelled me they would go on strike every day until I was back. They didn't exclude me in the end. But they did send the Labour MP around to try and recruit me to the Labour Party – Ha! [……] I got letters of support from all over and people sending me things on the history of school students movements.

~

Here Sara's mam remembers when the headmaster and local MP came to the house to discuss her daughter's behaviour in relation to the school strike:

I had an inkling she was plotting something but I didn't know it was going to be that dramatic. I'd encouraged her to fight for her school. So I had a knock at the door and it was the head master and the local MP. So they say 'Do you realise that your daughter has just took the whole school out on strike?' And I said, 'Oh? No.' Then, 'Do you realise that this is a mass truancy?' And they were going on about how bad it was and what they were going to do and I said, 'Well actually I'm quite proud of her. She's actually standing up for herself and doing something. She's fighting for the school'.

And they kept saying 'She's too young to be involved in politics'. I remember the conversation and this is what sticks in my mind. They kept saying 'She's too young to be involved in politics' then we would talk a bit more. Then 'She's too young to be involved in politics'. And I kept defending her and then, I'll always remember, it was so laughable, the MP said, 'Well if she feels so strongly then why doesn't she join the Labour Party?' And I said, 'Because she's too young to be involved in politics!'

*Newspaper clippings covering the school strike*


*Figure 25: Newspaper coverage of 'the school strike', Sara's personal archive*

Here are some excerpts from the clippings:

> "There is a long history of action by school students in this country. [….] School student are always dismissed by the authorities with patronising put downs. [….] School students played a part in liberating South Africa, some giving their lives. In my opinion, the more the system patronises you, the harder you should fight."

*

> "The press and my headmaster tried to say we had been led by adult political activists from the Socialist Worker Party. But parents have written to the school to say they support their children and are disgusted by the way the head tried to cover up the fact that students have their own political views." Sara, aged 15.

*

> "Yesterday the mother of one 15-year-old demonstrator, said she was proud of her daughter's stand against the cuts. She said, "it wasn't a mass truancy – and I think most people missed the whole point. My daughter is an excellent student with excellent attendance and excellent results and hopes to do A Levels and go to university. But if the grants are cut, she won't be able to go, and nor will my younger son, also at the school. She's fighting for her future and I'm proud of her."

…….

*The campaign to save Blakelaw School*

Here, Sara and her mam talk about a public meeting regarding Blakelaw's threatened closure.

Sara: I remember a public meeting in the school and I spoke at it. I'd left the school by then. At that point my brother was due to do his GCSEs and the question was do you pull him out or leave him in? Will he be mid-way through his GCSEs and would he have to switch half way through? And they weren't making a decision. And, do you remember, I spoke at that meeting and I cried.

Sara's mam: Yes, yes.

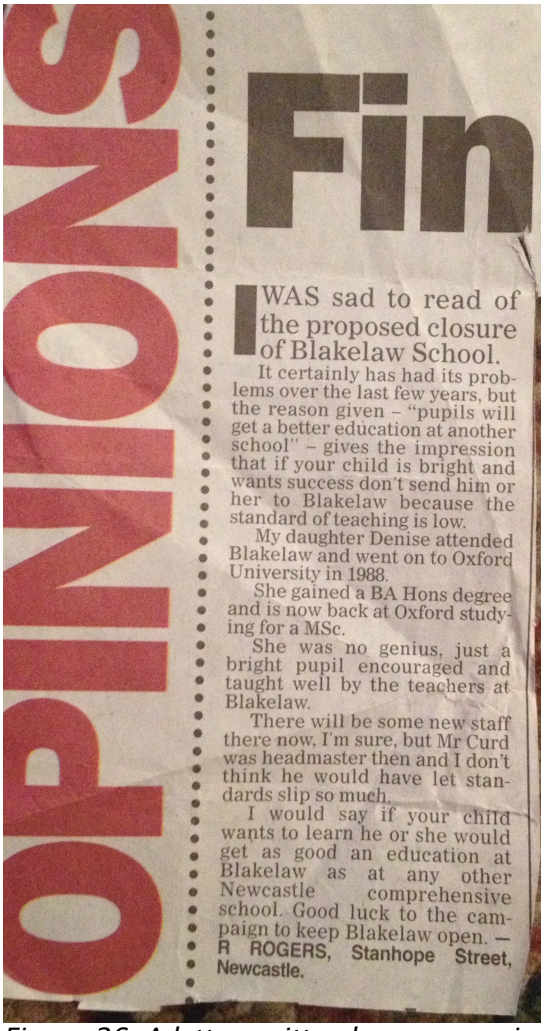
Sara: And remember the reaction, from that counsellor – 'Well we can all turn on the water works'…. I was saying, 'Look, my brother is in this position, it's not right', and I got upset, mainly out of anger. But they were packed out meetings, weren't they?

Sara's mam: Yes, parents and families. My memory of the meetings is that they were always biased. People were speaking passionately but nothing was listened to. They'd already decided. It was decided, the school is closing but we'll have these meetings but even though everyone spoke passionately and had good arguments the decision had been made.

Sara: But they were packed out. With people who don't care about education? Hundreds of people.

…….

*A clipping of a letter to the local paper in support of Blakelaw, written by my mam, and a badge from the campaign in which Sara and her mam were involved in*



OPINIONS

Fin

I WAS sad to read of the proposed closure of Blakelaw School.

It certainly has had its problems over the last few years, but the reason given – "pupils will get a better education at another school" – gives the impression that if your child is bright and wants success don't send him or her to Blakelaw because the standard of teaching is low.

My daughter Denise attended Blakelaw and went on to Oxford University in 1988.

She gained a BA Hons degree and is now back at Oxford studying for a MSc.

She was no genius, just a bright pupil encouraged and taught well by the teachers at Blakelaw.

There will be some new staff there now, I'm sure, but Mr Curd was headmaster then and I don't think he would have let standards slip so much.

I would say if your child wants to learn he or she would get as good an education at Blakelaw as at any other Newcastle comprehensive school. Good luck to the campaign to keep Blakelaw open. — R ROGERS, Stanhope Street, Newcastle.

*Figure 26: A letter written by my mam in support of the campaign to save Blakelaw from closure, Newcastle's Evening Chronicle circa 1996, personal archive*

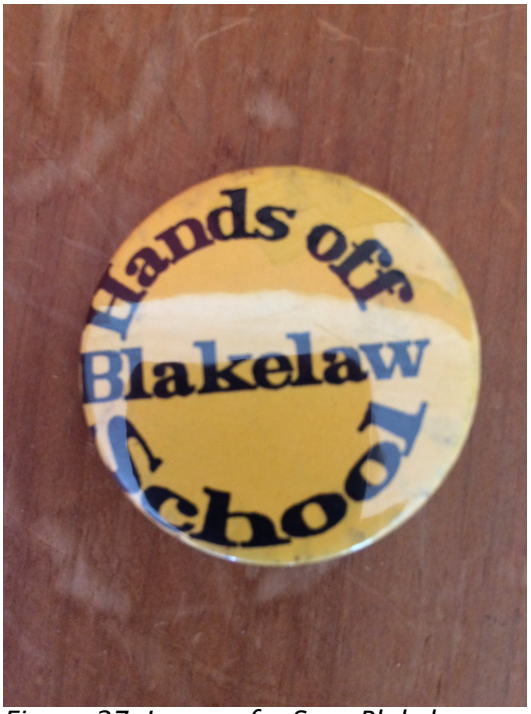



*Figure 27: Image of a Save Blakelaw School Campaign badge, Sara's personal archive*

…….

*Sara's mam reflects on the naming and shaming of Blakelaw as one of the worst schools in the country*

> I thought that was disgusting. Yes there were kids who were struggling in the school. But they'd gone into it struggling. They'd come from

primary school not being able to read or write. So how was that Blakelaw's fault? What really annoyed me is that they'd compare it to schools you had to sit an exam to enter! If you'd failed your GCSEs after having passed an exam to get in there would have been something sadly wrong with that school. But when you've kids going into a school from, you know, really bad backgrounds, maybe abusive homes and struggling just to survive and they're getting some kind of education. To me, that's surely a thriving school, not a failing school?

…….

*Media image of Save Blakelaw campaigners and Tony Blair*


*Figure 28: Tony Blair MP and Save Blakelaw from Closure protestors, 18 May 1996*

I found this photo on a stock image website. Tony Blair stands in the foreground. He became Prime Minister the following year. In the background stand the campaigners. When I sent it to Sara she told me that her mam is the women to the right of Blair's arm.

…….

*A former teacher defends Blakelaw*

Mr. J got in touch with me after I wrote a blog post about my time at Blakelaw several years before I became a doctoral student. I began my post with the sentence:

> Blakelaw School in Newcastle's West End was so bad they closed it twice.

I deliberately emphasised the more difficult aspects of having been a pupil at Blakelaw for me and Rob. I wanted to challenge the 'brightest and best' narrative by encouraging readers to think about how easily other pupils might have missed out on the opportunity to go to university. Several former pupils contacted me to say they could relate to much of what I'd said. Then a former teacher got in touch. He gently and politely challenged my portrayal of Blakelaw. We had a conversation via email at the time for which I am grateful because I don't think this particular project would have taken form without it. I contacted Mr. J again once I started to gather material. Here are some excerpts from his emails. They are quite long and I know there is a risk that this might look like a 'raw data-dump'. So I'll remind you that there is no raw data in this thesis, Reader. I have included the following material because it both illustrates and performs an act of resistance against official records which work to produce Blakelaw as a failing, failed school:

> The root of the problem at Blakelaw School was that it was comprehensive in name only. Schools are never truly comprehensive but with parental choice, there is little chance of this ever happening. Parents chose to send their children to Kenton or Gosforth (with a larger middle-class intake and bigger sixth forms and consequently better academic results) thinking they were better schools. The result was that many of the 'problem' children were concentrated in Blakelaw. Pupils like you, of exceptional ability, struggled to do well in a distorted socio-economic environment. Teachers spent much of their time controlling and

disciplining rather than teaching. Yes, you would probably have had an easier time at Gosforth, but as you found at Oxford, there would have been other disadvantages and issues. At the end of the day we all live in an imperfect world. In a perfectly competitive environment and if we were all identical people, we would all have the same opportunities.

Think of the teachers at Blakelaw [he lists several]. What most had in common was a sincere care for the kids. One never heard them pulling kids apart. They often laughed at their behaviour and were worn out trying to control/help/educate them. But they really cared about them all. And the kids inwardly knew that. They were mostly very good teachers and they had to be to survive at Blakelaw. The greatest things a teacher can do, is to make pupils feel valued for what they are, to believe in them and to find their strengths and develop them. If kids feel loved and valued, they have a chance of believing in themselves and greater likelihood of success. Most of the staff at Blakelaw were like that.

Sadly they ended up closing the school (which was a beacon in the community) because it did not meet the superficial performance indicators wanted from Ofsted (our friendly Gestapo). The politicians have always been so out of touch with what really matters in education. How often have you heard them on TV saying that what we need is teachers who really care about the kids and who believe in them? No - it's all the jargon about exam standards and new curriculum. If we could only get it right from the early years, the rest might follow.

When I first started Blakelaw in 1980, the Head teacher, Ken Gulliver, had introduced so many innovative ideas ahead of the time, including, for example, Political, Health and Money education. There was a community wing in the Lower School (offering support for unemployed young people, the aged, single parents etc) a mother and toddlers group and, a community newspaper ('Roundabout'). We gained the

Schools Council Curriculum Award for the work. You will probably remember when you were in Upper School, how all the rooms were carpeted and had excellent facilities e.g Drama Workshop, Language Labs, new Science Labs, etc etc. The school had been given a DFES [Department for Education and Skills] grant of £3/4 million as part of what was called the LAPP (Lower Attaining Pupils Project). This was targeted at the bottom 40%ile of students for whom the GCSE was not designed (most of the kids at Blakelaw). Blakelaw was the only school involved nationally to adopt a 'whole school approach' to low attainment. Most schools identified a cohort and adopted an alternative curriculum. The project was evaluated by Newcastle School of Education and the NFER (National Foundation for Educational Research). Needless to say the outcomes of their research (which they compared with several other schools in Newcastle) were very positive. We introduced a modular curriculum with internal and external certification, Records of Achievement, Residential Experience, Community Service, Work Experience, an extensive PE course, etc. Don't want to bore you, but there was a lot on offer - nothing unique - but a great deal in one school.

But despite all the work that went into this project, and the evidence of success, they ended up closing the school. The decision was made on falling rolls (kids went to Kenton) and poor attendance. I could write a book about it all - not short of a hundred anecdotes! Even today it is something I really feel strongly about. Hopefully somewhere in your research you can address what really matters in education and give hope to thousands of teachers who give their heart and soul to their work only to see it undermined by political influences.

…….

The Blakelaw school depicted above does not need a saviour. Its pupils, parents and teachers are resourceful, bright, hard-working, caring. They work to resist and expose the processes that produce Blakelaw as a failure:

the depiction of an act of political protest as a mass truancy; the characterisation of the West End of Newcastle as a place where people do not value education; the idea that a school's worth can be captured in examination results. Here we see a school that works to meet the needs of poor children who live in an area affected by long term economic hardship. It is not a failed school but a school that has been failed by those in power.

### 13.4 The impact of subjectification on our educational trajectories

Subjectification is an effect of dynamic power relationships. Power works to produce opportunities as well as to restrict them. In Alan's case, for example, Blakelaw's subject positioning as a 'bad' or 'rough' or 'failing' school helped secure a job after his boss's wife, on looking thought a pile of very similar CVs, suggested 'if this guy came though Blakelaw ok you should give him a shot.' My own position as a 'bright' pupil was contingent upon a context in which a high proportion of children had some difficulties in learning, itself contingent upon a number of complex economic, political and spatial factors. Within this setting, my difficulties with the written word were perceived as minor and did not undermine my 'bright girl' subjectivity. The Marxist chaplain's materially grounded perception of Blakelaw as a school in a socially deprived area was a crucial component of the conditions of possibility under which I became an Oxford undergraduate. He would not have contacted the school otherwise. Ironically, I got into Oxford *because* I went to Blakelaw but was then bestowed with a 'brightest and best' subject position by the local newspaper reporter who covered my story as someone who got into Oxford *despite* having gone to Blakelaw:

> Blakelaw Comprehensive School in Newcastle's west end doesn't claim to carry the same academic clout as Eton or Harrow. So imagine the school pride that's accompanied the news of the inner city school's first Oxbridge success. Denise Rogers is a one off – a shining example of perseverance, determination and achievement. And the answer to a teacher's prayers. In October this year she becomes the first ever pupil

> from Blakelaw Comprehensive School on the west side of Newcastle – tough rather than rough, she says – to take up a place at Oxford. [……]
>
> Mr. T, head of religious education in Blakelaw says that the last couple of years have been one of the highlights of his long teaching career. "It has been a bit like Educating Rita", he says, cheerfully. "But my reward is enormous. I feel a great sense of satisfaction and fulfilment. She is the brightest girl I've ever taught and I'm delighted for her.

As I've mentioned already, the article makes no mention of the mechanisms by which I 'earned' my place or of my A Level results. There is no space for details like that in a heroic 'brightest and best' tale.

My A Level results, a B and two Es, produced an uncomfortable disjoint between my bright-girl subject position and my perception of myself as a subject. The disappointment and shame I felt reveals my uncritical acceptance that A Level results were a measure of my intelligence and worthiness. All the people I met at Oxford with grades below an A had been privately educated and offered a place under the Oxford entrance exam process rather than on the basis of their A level grades. Everyone who occupied the same 'state-school educated' category as me had 3 or 4 A grades. I was not ashamed of my background and made no conscious effort to become 'more middle class'. I did, however, respond to 'jokey' comments about my accent or social housing estate background uncritically. I once went to stay at the home of a public school educated friend during the holidays and her mother asked if I'd be more comfortable sleeping in the kennels with the dogs than in the house with the family. I remember laughing in response because I understood it was 'just a joke'. The two concert fliers reproduced below where placed in my pigeon hole within a few months of one another during my first year. Written by the pianist, a former public schoolboy, the first says 'Do come – it's Kultural', the second 'Cum and get sum Kultoor'. This was also a joke and clearly a good one worthy of repetition as far as he was concerned.

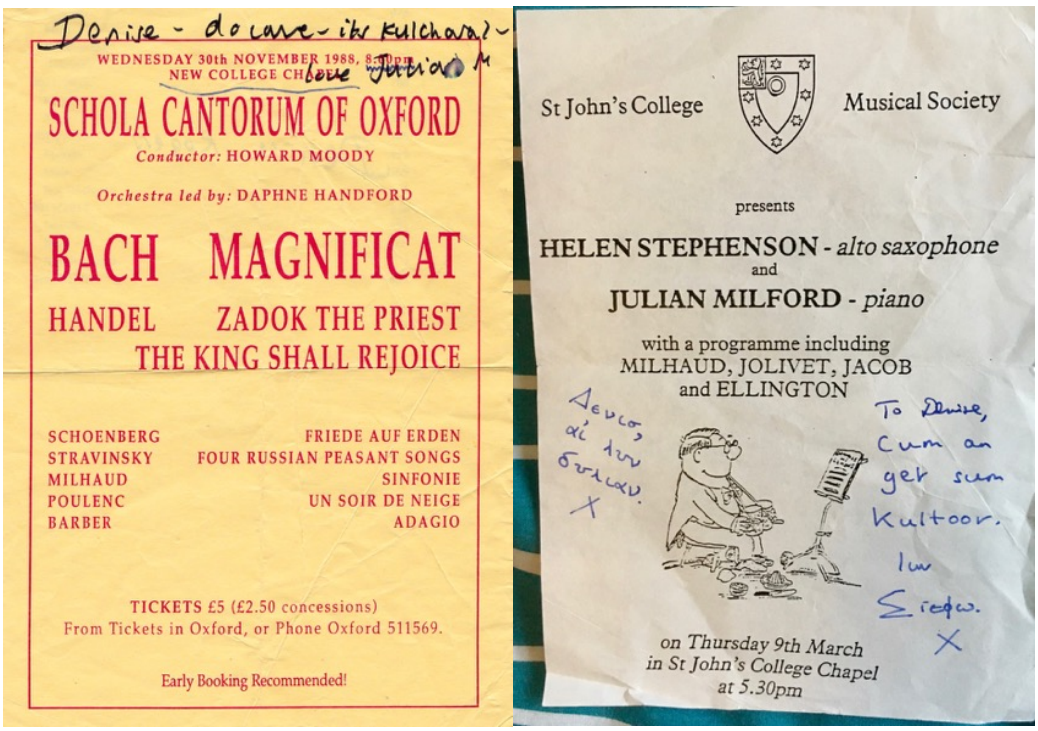
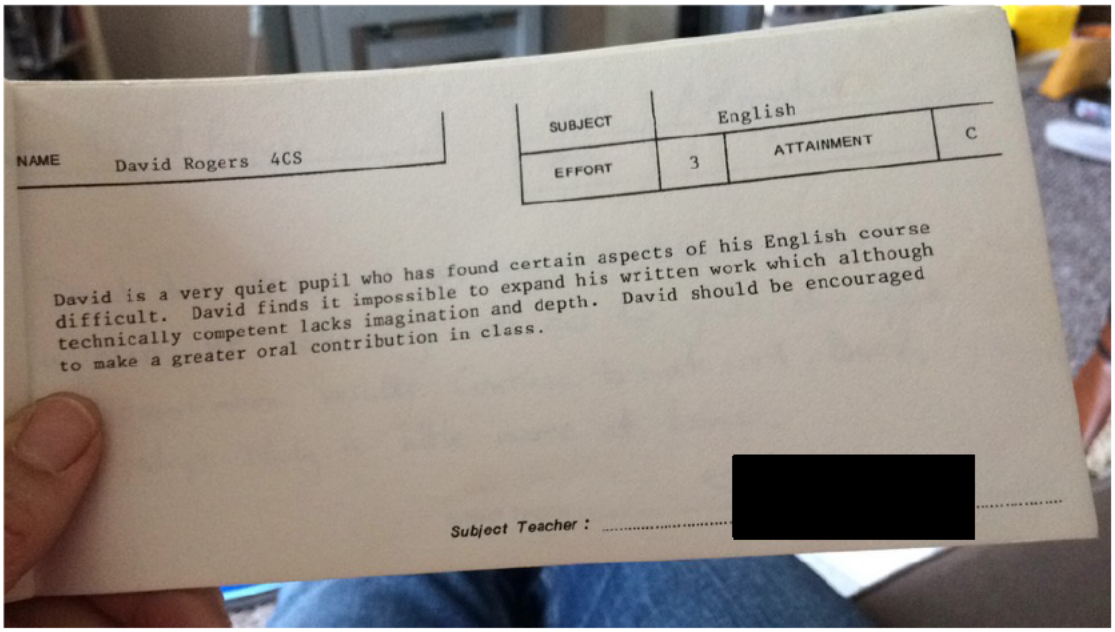



*Figure 29: Concert flyers given to me by fellow students, personal archive*

Unlike many of my peers, I'd had little preparation in thinking of myself, and being thought of, as a potential Oxford undergraduate. I shared the view of the person who gave me these fliers that I was 'other'. I did not direct anger towards them or the mother who made the kennel comment but towards the Marxist chaplain for letting me in and my RE teacher for encouraging me to take the opportunity and myself for my lack of ability and laziness in not working harder to catch up.

Sara, in contrast, having been exposed to a number of empowering political discourses and the message from her parents that she could 'do anything she wanted' was able to resist the attempts of her LSE peers to position her as inferior or unworthy. Her involvement, and her mam's, in the construction of 'Blakelaw the successful, thriving school' perhaps offered some protection during her difficult time at the LSE. I use the word construction in its material sense here to incorporate action, bodies, physical effort, badges, placards, letters, speeches and marches.

Alan, Sara and I fitted into the subject positions bestowed upon us during our time at Blakelaw. We were able to recognise ourselves in the positive 'gaze' of our teachers and the internal school systems of classification in which we were generally positioned near or at the top. In contrast, there is a disjoint between the positioning of Rob and David within Blakelaw and the way they came to see themselves and be seen by others: as able, quick, adaptable, bright. Look at these two school reports of David's written a year apart when he was 14 and 15 years old.



NAME David Rogers 4CS

| SUBJECT | English | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| EFFORT | 3 | ATTAINMENT | C |

David is a very quiet pupil who has found certain aspects of his English course difficult. David finds it impossible to expand his written work which although technically competent lacks imagination and depth. David should be encouraged to make a greater oral contribution in class.

Subject Teacher : [redacted]

*Figure 30: David's school report for English circa 1985*

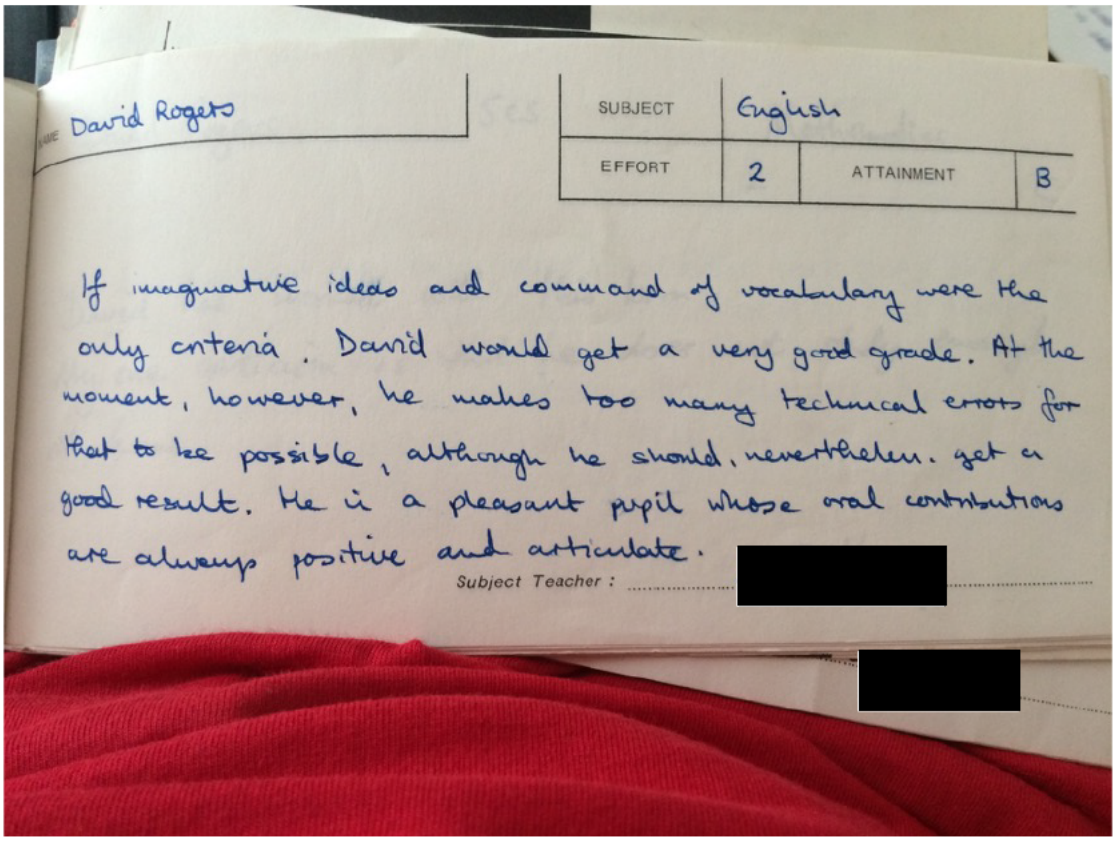



*Figure 31: David's school report for English circa 1987*

The first describes him as 'a quiet pupil' who has 'found aspects of his English course work difficult'. This child finds it 'impossible to expand his written work which although technically competent lacks imagination and depth.' He 'should be encouraged to make a greater contribution in class'. The second declares that 'if imaginative ideas and command of vocabulary were the only criteria, David would get a very good grade'. Sadly, 'he makes too many technical errors for that to be possible.' He is a 'pleasant pupil whose oral contributions are always positive and articulate'.

The reports do not suggest that this child was 'known' within Blakelaw. Similarly, Rob's dyslexia and abilities went largely unnoticed during his time at Blakelaw. Perhaps Rob and David's quiet, non-sporty male subject positioning rendered them invisible at Blakelaw, a school whose greatest talent, one could argue, was holding onto and nurturing children that would probably have been excluded or forgotten about in other schools. And perhaps the gap between institutional and self-subjectification explains why

both Rob and David, in different ways, spent a lot of the time 'absent' from Blakelaw. Absenting yourself is an act of resistance, as is Rob's account of his 'playing the system' though his messy handwriting and slow pace of work, and David's account of the school's failure to ensure an environment that felt safe enough to allow him to fulfil his 'brainy' first year potential.

…….

### 13.5 Analytical insights

Thinking with Foucault's notion of the subject has encouraged me to consider the ways in which the educational trajectories of my contributors and I are bound up with a range of discourses, narratives and counter-narratives all of which are historically rooted in conditions of material hardship. Foucault wasn't a relativist. Thinking with Foucault's notion of the subject doesn't require us to treat all accounts of the past as 'equally true' but it does require us to think critically about all accounts of the past. Rob and David cannot locate themselves in an account of Blakelaw that stresses its thriving, caring, pupil-focused, determined, nature. Sara would struggle to recognise and locate herself in the failing school of official archived records and the uncaring and unimaginative school that features in David and Robs memories. I can recognise both. My school days were challenging, hard, frustrating and tinted with love, affirmation, enjoyment and connection. Thinking with Foucault's take on the processes of subjectification produces Blakelaw as a school capable of accommodating our recollections in all their diversity in a very material sense.

Whilst my data may appear to 'contain' examples of resistance against processes of subjectification, what I present in the main are representations of memories. This is not to deny that my contributors and I acted at the time to resist the subject-positions imposed on us, our neighbourhoods and our school. It is to acknowledge the impact of the passage of time on the understandings and concepts available to us. Whilst our stories contain fragments and echoes of the past and its material consequences, I must

remind you, Reader, that "a subject's ability to speak is ontologically bounded by their location within specific institutional topography of a particular social formation' (Heller, 1996, p. 91). The stories we tell and the versions I present here are 'interpretations, and interpretations of interpretations that [we] have long forgotten and/or reinterpreted' (St. Pierre 2001, p.142). Like virtually all the children to have passed through Blakelaw School, the world my contributors and I were born into, and in which we learned to understand the world and ourselves, was 'working class' (with the many presences and absences that entails) which gave us access to certain ways of processing and framing our experiences and not others. The passage of time exposes everyone to new experiences and interactions that alter what it is possible to think and say, in subtle or sometimes significant ways. More specifically, we have been exposed to discourses, ideas and culture(s) associated with a university education that were not available to our parents and most members of our childhood communities. What we have the capacity to think and say about our pasts will be different now to what would have been possible during our school days. The past is colonised, inevitably, by what comes after. This means that the tactics available to us to resist the processes of subjectification change over time. The stories we tell as adults are capable of modes of resistance that were not available to us as children. Memory itself, through a Foucauldian lens, is also a form and tactic of resistance.

# PART THREE

# Chapter 14

# Thinking with Theory: Diffractions

*Do I contradict myself?*

*Very well then I contradict myself,*

*(I am large, I contain multitudes.)*

Walt Whitman, Song of Myself, 1855

## 14.1 Purpose of this chapter

This chapter presents the only kind of conclusions a self-proclaimed poststructurally positioned researcher can: tentative, contextual, partial, contingent. That is not to say my conclusions are 'merely subjective'. They do reflect my own practices of meaning-making but they are also anchored to entanglements of discourse, matter, place and time. And memory.

> This theatre of time is the very contrary of the search for lost time: for I remember pathetically, punctually, and not philosophically, discursively: I remember in order to be unhappy / happy – not in order to understand.

Here Roland Barthes talks about the remembering of scenes from a romantic relationship which has come to an end (Barthes, 1996, p. 217). In the past, I could have applied this description to my own practice of remembering scenes from school and Oxford. So what happens when we try to remember philosophically and discursively in order to understand? What difference does it make?

In considering the potential impact of my doctoral project - my 'contribution to knowledge' as it is traditionally termed in doctoral theses - I hold in mind Barad's idea of the small differences that come to matter. To put it another way, I have used this chapter to consider the potential agency of my thesis and the intra-active processes that produced it. In 14.2 – 14.5 I consider the pro(duction)s and con(straint)s associated with my thinking with theory methodology in relation to: the opening up and proliferation of knowledge which contributes to a 'fight for the oppressed past'; the production of topographical, anti-meritocratic accounts of our educational 'success'; its facilitation of interesting 'cuts' whilst encouraging transparency about the partial, fragmentary, ethically charged nature of any analysis of the past; and by opening up new, productive subject positions.

In 14.6 – 14.7 I reflect more broadly on the ways in the contributions of poststructural research paradigm in relation to the diffractive nature of my thesis and my engagement with 'others' including my contributors, readers, and those interested in my methodology and/or the subject of educational trajectories inside and outside the academy.

…….

Certain things come to the fore when a group of friends, all of whom 'contain multitudes', come together. Interesting conversations, a tendency to drink too much, laughter, the production of art or the making of big plans. Maybe all of these things if you are really lucky. This chapter considers what happened when I invited Bourdieu, Barad, Foucault, Derrida, Benjamin, St. Pierre, Lather, Butler and other 'posties' round to my house to discuss our surprising educational trajectories. As you read on, bear in mind that I am inclined to reflect on the time we spent together fondly because they are my friends and have been, on the whole, really good company.

## 14.2 The opening up and proliferation of knowledge which contributes to a 'fight for the oppressed past'

As Mazzei and Jackson promised, thinking with theory has worked to 'open up and proliferate' rather than 'foreclose and simplify' knowledge (2012, p.vii) about our surprising journeys from Blakelaw to university and beyond. Thinking with different theorists has produced different accounts ourselves and the school itself and different conditions of possibility under which going to university became thinkable and doable have materialised through different theoretical lenses. This is important because our interpretations of the part played by the school in shaping our journeys through formal education were so variable. Of course they were. Blakelaw, like us, contains multitudes. [I speak in the present tense because the children we were and the experiences we had are inseparable from who we are and how we experience things today.]

This is something more than the presentation of multiple perspectives. You might remember this quote from earlier:

> [D]ominant history teems with the remnants of alternative possibilities, and the job of the subversive intellectual is to trace the lines of the worlds they conjured and left behind. (Halberstram p.19)

My thesis does not attempt to replace the history told by league table results, policy initiatives, media reports and TV documentaries with 'truer' versions of 'what really happened' at a school in the West End of Newcastle during the 80s and 90s. What it does do, or at least tries to do, is trace lines to alternative worlds that were almost left behind. They are worlds conjured up by recollections and artefacts anchored to conditions that extend beyond us as individuals. Rob's placement in the remedial unit, the fundraising evenings organised by the teachers to enable Sara to go to America, the laughter, the absence of university preparation, the critical and inconsistent school reports, the parental choice policy, the economic hardship, the PMT, the violence and disruption, the fear and the love were all real and all interconnected. They were experienced differently according to our positioning as subjects. Or our habitus and access to capitals. Or the ways in which we emerged from the intra-active entanglement of matter and discourse that also produced policies that determine what is important and relevant (e.g. exam results, English, maths, science) and what isn't (clothes, food, adequate housing, artistic expression, relationships, fun).

Caputo proclaims that:

> "writing a history is as powerful a way to deconstruct something as one could desire, for a history shows that something that is trying to pass itself off as having dropped from heaven has been historically constituted" (2003, p.197 in Jackson & Mazzei 2008, p.309)

A thinking with theory methodology has helped me dislodge official versions of events embodied in archived records and reports from their privileged,

faux-neutral, position. Blakelaw's failings are no longer 'a matter of fact' but rather a set of interpretations linked to discursive, material, spatial and temporal conditions.

## 14.3 The production of topographical, anti-meritocratic accounts of our educational 'success'

Thinking with Bourdieu, Barad and Foucault has helped me to produced multi-dimensional, deeply relational readings of the conditions under which going to university became thinkable and doable for 'people like us'. They are readings in which agency is dispersed across and between people, matter and discourse over time to such an extent that it becomes analytically unfruitful to focus on the qualities and characteristics of individuals. Or schools, for that matter. Thinking with Bourdieu, Barad and Foucault produces schools, not as 'citadels standing apart from society' (Manchester and Bragg, 2013, p. 820) but rather:

> microcosms of the wider world, permeated and permeable; not an island, but a piece of the continent, as John Donne has it. They reflect and contain within themselves at least some of the contradictions and imperfections of the wider world. (ibid)

Thinking with Bourdieu, Barad and Foucault has thus helped me to resist accounts underpinned by a meritocratic narrative that associates formal educational achievement with essential personal characteristics such as intelligence, diligence and determination. Instead, I have produced accounts which highlight the ways in which the material and discursive conditions of our lives created a topography in which the paths leading to university were narrow, steep, in need of repair and sometimes impassable. The topography is quite different in middle class settings where the paths to university are more numerous, broader, better maintained and clearly sign-posted. Although, of course, the individuals who live within any landscape will have their own constellation of circumstances to contend with. The fact that my contributors and I made it to university *is* surprising. But when our journeys

are viewed from a distance some of the things that most likely made a difference become visible as dots of event, experience and circumstance join up to form a route made navigable by bridges, tunnels, maps, tips, helping hands, skills, training and wristbands granting entry to paths that are usually cordoned off to the likes of us.

When we think in this way it becomes apparent that other people from backgrounds similar to ours never made it to university, not because they weren't bright or hard working enough but because the conditions of possibility never arose within the constellation of events and relationships in which their lives took form. And you'll also appreciate that some who might have had access to the path that led to university chose to take another because they preferred the views or suspected they were more suited to the terrain. It's important to remember that going to university is not a happy ending, not a winning destination, in and of itself.

This kind of thinking does not require a clear distinction between the micro-details and sedimented structures that make and shape people's lives because the two are inextricably linked. We are simply looking at the topography of the landscape from different vantage points using a variety of tools: drones, binoculars, infra-red goggles, thermal imaging cameras, iPhones and microscopes. These tools produce still and moving images and sound recordings which, when considered together, enable us to gain an impression of the relationships between what appear as details and structures: the relevance of a child's physicality and ability to fight within the context of their schooling in an economically deprived area, for example. In this respect, thinking with Bourdieu, Barad and Foucault have, in different ways, enabled me to maintain a sense of personhood inseparable from the landscape which shapes it and is shaped by it. This approach might take us beyond an intersectional approach to educational trajectories in that it encourages mindfulness to the structures and categories that work to produce us whilst paying attention to the small differences that come to matter, producing opportunities to become something 'other' even amongst

those who are statistically unlikely to deviate from the path made probable according to their socio-economic status, dis/ability, gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation. This is something I would like to explore in the future.

## 14.4 Interesting 'cuts' and the partial, fragmentary, ethically charged nature of analyses of the past

Thinking with theory takes nothing 'as read'. The deconstructive nature of the approach heightened my sensitivity to the processes involved in the manifestation of 'data' and the ways in which the things I chose to focus on in my project 'materialized' whilst those I ignored or couldn't see were rendered invisible. This 'cutting together-apart' (Barad, 2014) resonates with Bourdieu's assertion that 'the social world can be uttered and constructed in different ways' (2001b, p.298) and Benjamin's claim that 'there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism' (1930/1999, p. 248). In opting to write about physical violence, for example, I played a role in its materialisation as a component of our educational trajectories. I found very little in the 'widening participation' literature about the negotiation of violence as a condition of possibility under which 'people like us' make it to university and nothing about its role as a potential facilitator. The same applies to menstruation and style (hair and clothing), both of which emerged as part of the constellation of conditions of possibility in which some of us made it to university.

Of course, the 'things' excluded from our trajectories and therefore not brought into being within this thesis (because we forgot about them or they didn't seem relevant to us or because I did not ask about them or notice them when they did appear) are vast. 'Physical violence' made the cut and is now part of a constellation that links past and present. Other things did not. I'd have likely made other cuts if I'd thought with other theories. Perhaps with Donna Haraway (e.g. 2003) I'd have focussed more on my relationship with dogs, which was profound and integral to the way I saw myself and

related to the world as a child[22]. Perhaps with Sara Ahmed (e.g. 2014) or Raymond Williams (e.g. 1977) I would have paid more attention to the structures of emotion and feeling relevant to our journeys. With Doreen Massey I'd have focussed more on space, place and power and perhaps incorporated deep mapping into my thinking with theory methodology. Thinking with these thinkers would have produced an interesting and quite different thesis, I think. My thinking with theory reminds me not to privilege as 'more real' that which appears in this thesis over that which remains invisible.

Thinking with theory has also encouraged me to consider the ethically charged nature of my data gathering/construction and selection practices in terms of the difference made as a result of what I have written in this thesis (because it brought to life and was enlivened by the theories I chose to think with) and what I discarded. I've constructed people and journeys from a few fragments, a tiny proportion of all that could have been observed and listened to and experienced and told. Having more face-to-face conversations or focus groups or social media discussions would have produced more rich and interesting potential data but it would have remained fractional given the depth and complexity of that which I have audaciously tried to explore here – 'the conditions of possibility pertinent to the educational trajectories of 5 people'. From a poststructural perspective this is not problematic because, as I've already stated, the micro-details and sedimented structures that shape and are shaped by people's lives are inseparable. But I must acknowledge that I could have produced different accounts with the same data. I've only touched on issues of 'structural gender inequality', for example, opting for breadth over depth in my exploration of the things my contributors and I identified as potentially relevant to our surprising educational trajectories. I could have written a

[22] The fact that Carol Taylor has written an article called 'For Hermann: How do I love thee? Let me count the ways. Or, What my dog has taught me about a post-personal academic life' (2017) is one of the reasons I wanted her to be my external examiner.

different thesis focused entirely on the role of gender norms without having to 'gather' any additional data.

Thinking with theory has drawn my attention to my privileges and responsibilities as author. I see now how thesis writing can be an act of resistance. Aided by Bourdieu, Barad and Foucault I have enjoyed exposing the constructed nature of the 'brightest and best' and the 'failing school' and challenging the notion that the experiences of 'children like us' can be easily categorised as disadvantaged. But whether I like it or not, a poststructurally positioned thesis is as much an act of resistance against academics, writers and campaigners who present clear answers to social problems. I've found it uncomfortable at times to position myself in the way of those whose most powerful drive is to expose and redress social inequality. A Bourdieusian methodology would have perhaps enabled me to draw firmer conclusions, more angrily expressed. But then I would have lost some capacity to embrace uncertainty and a scepticism that sees everything as potentially dangerous. And so, on balance, I'm glad I did it this way. I'm also grateful that there are others who are more inclined to reach a conclusion and stand on a side. I think there is room for us both.

## 14.5 Thinking with theory and the opening up of new, productive subject positions

Thinking with theory made a new version of a subject position available to me which served to introduce a new element to the constellation of conditions in which my unusual educational trajectory unfolded. This is how.

…….

As a child I displayed a number of 'signs and symptoms' of dyslexia which I would not come to associate with the 'condition' for many years: bad spelling, a slow reading and writing pace, a tendency to write the letters 'd' and 'b' back to front, no innate sense of left and right and a terrible, virtually non-existent sense of direction. I have never been officially diagnosed. I

volunteered for a psychology project at Oxford Brookes University in my mid-20s. The researchers assessed me as being 'moderately' dyslexic, the other available categories being 'mildly' or 'severely'. Every online self-assessment I've completed since has suggested the same. I've never pursued an official diagnosis, probably because by the time I came to recognise myself as dyslexic, I'd developed techniques and had access to technology that reduced the impact of my symptoms to such an extent that I rarely thought about it. As an adult, I gained several postgraduate qualifications and held down some responsible jobs, most of which involved a substantial reading and writing component. I've had positive feedback on my written work, the most satisfying being the distinction I was awarded in an MSc in Educational Research. And so, whilst I had recognised myself as dyslexic for some time, it had never been a significant 'subject position' to inhabit compared to, for example, my being queer or a woman or of working class, Geordie heritage.

I met the artist Stephanie Roberts through a set of chance encounters triggered by the unexpected breakdown of my marriage during what I'd assumed would be the beginning of the final year of my PhD. Steph was working on a project focused on her relationship with her own dyslexia. The resulting exhibition, 'Case Study',[23] drew on what she called 'a lifetime's experience of wrestling with dyslexia'. She invited visitors to join her on her 'journey from word blindness to blind drawing, layering and concealment' as she 'retrace[d] past experiences' to 're-frame this aspect of [herself] from disability to positive ability'. I wrote this after we met in the gallery.

> Steph has gone to get us some tea. I am alone in the gallery. I have spent the morning contemplating the losses of the past year. I feel sad but still. Undistracted. Unusually present. I stand and look at a delicate, intricate piece. A collage? A mosaic? A painting? An assemblage? I don't have the artistic vocabulary to know what to call

[23] For details see: http://www.stephanierobertsart.com/case-study Accessed 25 October 2018

it. I know it's beautiful though. The shapes, the materials, the text, the colours. I don't know what it means but it's mesmerising.

Steph returns and hands me a paper cup of tea which gets to work immediately thawing my numb hands – it's October and cold. I feel a surge of love for Steph for allowing us to drink tea in a gallery full of her work contrary, I feel sure, to art centre policy. We start to walk round the exhibition, stopping to stand before each piece. Steph explains to me the processes involved in their making and the feelings, memories, perceptions and events she has attempted to capture or reflect. Steph tells me that she feels more at ease in the language of artistic expression. She nevertheless translates her project effectively and elegantly into the language I am more familiar with – the spoken word. As a result, I am able to follow her story of profound pain, struggle, concealment, healing and redemption. It's the kind of redemption I am obsessed with, one that incorporates ugly, wrong, failed and disappointing elements of the past into something beautiful, hopeful, fragile. We are both standing before a work near the end of the exhibition. It incorporates the same kind of materials as the one I gazed at when I entered the gallery. But this one is light and spacious and full of oxygen. I turn to look back at the first one. It has been transformed. It is now so dark and claustrophobic I can barely look at it. We're in a different space now. Nothing has changed. Everything is different.

Something shifted as a result of this visceral experience. I felt 'hooked', emotionally and intellectually. I helped form a group with Steph and some other people, mainly dyslexics, mainly artists, who'd been affected by Case Study, and I sought more information about the dyslexic 'condition', something I hadn't done for many years. I discovered websites driven by dyslexic people and experts from the fields of education, psychology and neuroscience. All acknowledged the neurological basis of dyslexia and the difficulties people with this particular 'wiring' are likely to encounter. But

rather than deficit, the emphasis was firmly on the positive associations. The Made by Dyslexia website[24], for example, informs its readers that:

> dyslexics think laterally, creatively, and differently. Whilst no two dyslexics are the same, all will have a combination of some of the following skills which draw them towards specific careers and fields of endeavour which complement their skills and way of working.

Dyslexic skills, we are told, include an enhanced ability to visualise, imagine, explain concepts, tell stories, connect with people and to empathise.

Whilst it's clear from the recording of my interview with Rob that I already had some understanding of the association of dyslexia with 'big picture thinking' and 'problem solving' (see p.201), I suppose neither of these qualities, being terms generally applied within the world of management in which I'd never felt comfortable, had a particular resonance for me. The notion of my having a predisposition towards non-linear, conceptual thinking and a love of stories and connections did.

My thinking with theory methodology ensured that I took a deconstructive approach to the 'condition'. I saw how dyslexic people are created through scientific practice, policies, assessment tools and a dominant discourse that favours and recognises some abilities over others in educational settings. I also observed my own recognition of myself within the discourse as I started to attach new meaning to my dyslexia. With this subject position at my disposal, I wondered if the manifestation of some dyslexic traits (verbal communication skills and an ability to connect) had masked others (poor spelling, slow reading) within a context of economic deprivation where many children had 'learning difficulties' more significant than my own. Perhaps my verbal, behavioural and social skills, honed to compensate for my slow reading, were read as 'brightness' and 'goodness' by teachers, leading to their positive reinforcement. Maybe my ability to reason and grasp concepts

[24] Made by Dyslexia website: http://madebydyslexia.org Accessed 25 October 2018

persuaded the Marxist chaplain to offer me a place at Oxford. [Oxford University. I'm pushing 50 now, Reader, and I still can't quite believe it].

The impact of thinking with theory is emotional as well as intellectual. How can you be emotionally detached from ideas that relate to your sense of self, your most powerful drives and the aspects of your past that still smart occasionally? My attraction to the dyslexic subject-position in the weeks following the encounter lay, I suspect, in its capacity to explain or describe (sometimes the two operate as proxy for one another) an enduring sense of out-of-syncness with the social environment, something most of the dyslexics I have met have talked about. This out-of-syncness has, I think, something in common with Bhabha's post-colonial notion of 'unhomeliness' (1994) and Bourdieu's 'cleft habitus' (2008). I wonder whether dyslexic traits within the context of my schooling in an economically disadvantaged community were an integral component in the constellation of conditions that took me to Oxford. Perhaps I wouldn't have been seen as academically bright in another setting. Perhaps this would have saved me from decades of unsuitable jobs and a deep feeling of being in the wrong place. This, in turn, led me to reflect on the restrictive force of academic 'success' and the creative potential of failure. All highly speculative, of course. But it did make me think.

The productive potential of the 'dyslexic subject position' to help me make sense of myself was made available as a result of my interactions with theories in mainly written form. It is possible, then, that this thesis might serve to open the door to new or modified subject positions to those who read it.

### 14.6 The contributions of a diffractive approach

The notion of diffraction can be used to understand and describe many of the processes involved in attempting to undertake a poststructurally informed data driven social research project. Diffraction occurs when ideas, events, matter, time and space collide. This process creates new patterns

which might be beautiful and/or unnerving. Diffraction is about interruptions, interferences and differences that come to matter.

This thesis, like all theses, is the result of many diffractive collisions. My relationships with people, places, things and ideas have been woven into its body over several years. I can no longer isolate the individual threads of influence, love, pain, disappointment, illumination, obfuscation and joy associated with them: you can't unbake a cake. What I have done, which is unusual in a thesis, is attempt to represent the processes of diffraction within the text in various ways. In chapter 7, for example, I revealed some of the literature, ideas, materials and people that my thesis is 'in conversation with'. This enabled me to make visible, temporarily at least, that which left its mark on the thesis but is largely absent (e.g. the ideas of Walter Benjamin). It also allowed me to talk about influences which would not normally be incorporated into the literature review section of a traditional thesis (e.g. walks, talks and correspondence with an artist friend, a theatrical performance of Brecht's Mother Courage, the back catalogue of Talking Heads) all of which, in conjunction with the theoretical literature, produced in me new understandings.

I have used writing techniques designed to perform rather than explain what diffraction is. For example, in chapter 15 I write about a meeting with the Marxist Chaplain who gave me a place at Oxford. The account is framed and shaped by ideas introduced earlier in the thesis, most notably Barad's assertion that the past remains open to change, Bourdieu's notion of a habitus which is both constrained by and responsive to social experience and Foucault's understanding of the role of self-recognition in the process of subjectification. I include no citations in this chapter because I want to show how memories and interpretations of one's past are always underpinned by theories whether or not we are aware of this or can put a name to them. Chapter 15, then, is a representation of a diffraction pattern produced by collisions between my past and my present, me and the Marxist Chaplain,

the theories I have come into contact with during my PhD, my writing practices, the passage of time and your reading.

Chapter 5 is another example of diffractive writing in which I make connections between the circumstances of my birth and upbringing and my 'pre-poststructural' preferences and inclinations. I considered how this 'way of being in the world' might have had something to do with my ability to look at things from different angles and question social norms and even my interest in theology and 'the meaning of life'. And how my R.E. teacher and the Marxist chaplain might have interpreted these things as signs of intelligence. And how my refusal to accept social norms as neutral, which was also bound up with my sexuality and gender expression, was a useful disposition in the study of theology, which is basically a degree in critical thinking, as all arts and humanities degrees are to some extent. And that this might have helped me survive three years as an Oxford undergraduate despite my lack of cultural, social and economic capital. How all these things collided and interrupted one another to produce a future (now my past) which you couldn't have predicted.

And that's all quite persuasive, don't you think? But therein lies the problem. I've produced an account of myself which is a little too neat, too consistent, 'too-easy-to-tell' (Britzman, 1998, p. 13). The theoretical positioning of my project requires me to acknowledge that my desire to trace my poststructuralist leanings to early childhood and durable personality traits reveals more about my current interpretations of past events than it does about 'what really happened'. So, after writing chapter 5 I searched for some data to mess things up. I found some quite easily. My mam presented me with a snapshot of a 6-year-old me looking proud and happy in a long dress, my long hair combed into a state of temporary sleekness by my nana, who was also responsible for the wonky fringe. I remember that dress. My mam made it for a Christmas school party and I loved it. I was proud to wear it. Then there's the question of my sexuality. Why, I wonder, did it take me so long to come out to myself as gay? Surely a person so contrary, so willing to

reject binary norms, so fond of the margins and the edgelands could have worked out sooner that they were something other than heterosexual? And when I asked an old friend whether she'd seen me as 'different' when we were in school she replied 'yes, a little, but no more than me'. We had enough in common to fuel lots of talking and laughing in class – my teachers complained about it.

This interference has produced a messier version of myself and my past than the one I initially wrote up in chapter 5. Messier and freer. Trying to contain a ghost is the worst thing you can do. You have to let it breath, let it move, let it come and go as it wishes. Only then can you befriend it. Achieve a certain peace. Though the peace comes at a cost. Letting go of longstanding versions of the past, even unhappy ones, can result in a sense of lost identity and sadness. Like I said, diffraction creates new patterns that can be beautiful and/or unnerving.

I presented the thinking with theory chapters 9, 11, 13 discretely in order to explore the different ways in which they operate when data about our surprising educational trajectories is plugged into them. I have not overtly spent time exploring how these theories might interrupt one another to produce new ways of understanding and engagement with the world. (This is something I would like to do in future research projects.) The process of diffraction is, nevertheless, at work in these chapters. Barad's idea of the inseparability of measuring apparatus and observed phenomenon, for example, left a trace in the Bourdieu chapter in my decision to think with the concept of hysteresis to explore what happens when the 'rules of engagement' change quickly and unexpectedly and in my use of school inspection reports in the Foucault chapter, both of which demonstrate how introducing new indicators of success change the way we see an object of interest, be that a school or a student. My selection of Bourdieu as a theorist to think with is also a consequence and a representation of the diffractive process since, as I explain in 7.4, my Bourdieu is poststructurally inflected.

My diffractive outlook extends to my understanding of what my thesis might have to contribute to the widening participation literature and associated discussions around education policy. I have produced highly relational, topographical accounts of our educational 'success' that work against meritocratic narratives centered around the personal triumphs of the 'brightest and best'. The widening participation literature makes a similar gesture. This body of work is, however, produced from a range of research paradigms that share a preference for working with social categories and a willingness to make relatively fixed and certain epistemological claims which those of us who work in a poststructural paradigm would not be comfortable with. A diffractive approach enables me to resist positioning my study within the widening participation body of literature whilst recognizing that it might be of interest to researchers in that field. I also acknowledge that my work could not exist without the widening participation literature since it accepts (sous rature) the premise that an individual's probability of participating in higher education is significantly determined by their parents' education level and/or socio-economic status.

In terms of the potential relevance of my study for policy makers and scrutinizers, the application of a thinking with theory methodology has led me to draw some conclusions about Blakelaw and its closure which might be of interest. This is quite radical for a committed agnostic. The conclusions have affected my memories of school and enlivened my sense of social injustice and desire to make a difference in some way. I have concluded, mainly as a result of working with the 1974 H.M Inspectors and 1996 Ofsted reports, that Blakelaw was systematically dismantled. In other words, it was made to fail by policies and practices associated with concepts of 'failing schools' and 'raising standards'. The similarities in these two reports are as powerful as the differences. Both acknowledge that the catchment area is economically disadvantaged. The children arriving at Blakelaw are marked by the consequences of this. Most are failing to thrive. The 1974 report, whilst identifying areas of weakness, recognises the good work being done within the school under the circumstances. The 1996 report, so keenly focused on

universal performance indicators, does not. In a school in which 90% of year 7 children present with an reading age below their chronological age (Ofsted 1996, para.1) it is deemed appropriate to judge the school as inadequate. Its eventual closure, it seems to me, is inevitable within this particular construction of schooling, success and failure.

I would have enjoyed reading this thesis when I worked as a parliamentary researcher in the National Assembly for Wales. I would have enjoyed telling politicians that life and people are complicated and that it's often the small things that come to make a difference but that the big things, the sedimented structures that prop up inequalities, will only ever really change if people give up their privileges or have them wrestled from their grasp. It wouldn't have got me very far though. This isn't the kind of 'what works' study that tends to be of interest to politicians. Not directly. But I am hopeful that my ongoing engagement within the academy and with my contributor Sara who works as a campaigner and community organiser might have a diffractive effect that enables my work to be applied by different people in different settings in order to critically challenge policies in the interests of social justice. The diffraction patterns resulting from the interactions between poststructurally and critically inclined researchers and campaigners could be interesting and fruitful.

## 14.7 The impact of my poststructural positioning on my engagement with 'others'

I aimed to produce a thesis with the potential to engage people interested in its social subject matter regardless of their familiarity with poststructural thinking. This was an ethical ambition. I wanted my contributors to be able to contribute, object to and/or accept my representations of them and their journeys. Furthermore, my project creates space for versions of events and selves at odds with or at least more complicated than those contained in publicly available archives and I wanted those within and outside the academy to be able to respond to that.

Thesis writing, from a poststructural perspective, is an act of resistance in relation to dominant assumptions about 'correct' academic practice. I stand in good company here with other women who have challenged traditional ways of writing within the academy: Hélène Cixous (2000), Suzanne Gannon (2005), Carol Taylor and Rachel Handforth (2016), Tami Spry (2001) and Eva Bendix-Petersen (2013) to name but a few. When you read a lot of poststructurally inflected articles and books, go to conferences where the authors talk about and perform their ideas, and have open-minded, supportive supervisors, it's easy to forget that the academy as a whole remains a conventional institution wedded to positivist and/or humanist conceptualisations of validity and expectations of style. I am reminded that similar assumptions dominate in society at large every time someone asks me about my 'research question' and my 'findings' and I know they are not using the terms 'sous rature'. I am nervous about sharing my work with those who have had no exposure to poststructural thinking but I hope I have explained sufficiently why traditional ways of doing social research are open to question and that there is some value in experimenting with different approaches.I expect some readers, even friends, will consider my efforts pointless at best, self-indulgent at worst. Luckily, I have a contrary disposition so we will hopefully agree to disagree and remain friends.

In grappling with the ethical implications of my poststructural 'ethico-onto-epistemological' sense of accountability (Barad, 2012, p. 52) I came to several conclusions. I came to realise that sending my contributors excerpts from the thesis in which I'd referred to them and/or their recollections wasn't the right thing to do. As you have seen Reader, they are all contextualised and woven through the thesis as a whole. I discussed potentially controversial content with my contributors when it emerged in our recorded conversations. They didn't request that anything be omitted but I decided to exclude some accounts from the thesis because I suspected they might come to regret their inclusion. I sent out a draft of the entire thesis to each contributor at the point at which it was ready for submission including pointers to the pages on which I refer to them. Since Rob is

dyslexic, I offered to audio-record excerpts that mention him. He didn't take up my offer but we have agreed to meet to talk about the thesis in person. I did not expect any of my contributors to respond for weeks given the length of the thesis, their busy schedules and the time of year (Christmas). I came to realise that my accountability and responsibility to my contributors cannot and should not end at the point at the point of submission or viva. I used the term 'contributors' and not 'co-researchers' in order to be transparent about my authorial privilege and responsibility. But I will respond to their comments and feedback as I take this project forward (in terms of any related activities). By the date of my viva two contributors had read the thesis and responded. Tim, the Marxist Chaplain was complementary about my use of theory, the accuracy of my account of our meeting, and the value of the project. He concluded:

> At the end of it I thought, first, how important teachers in secondary education are. They can blight you, but they can also open up paths for life. Second, I was thinking of the amazing work the WEA [Workers Educational Association] did in the 20s and 30s - giving them an absolutely first rate education without requiring them to pay tens of thousands in fees. Why did that go down the drain... I guess the OU was supposed to take it on, but it never did, quite. One of the things your thesis does is (very properly) to put the whole question of what we mean by education, and therefore how we do it, under scrutiny.

My brother David also responded. Initially he expressed concerns that my use of verbatim quotes of informal language, slang and 'grammatically incorrect' sentences would make him look 'thick'. This was not something I'd considered so I will make sure it's something I discuss with contributors at an early stage in the research in future. When I explained my reasons for doing so – my not wanting to privilege 'correct' written English over the spoken word and its evocative power – he said he was happy for me to leave it as it stood. My brother has never found it difficult to express his feelings to and about me so I felt confident to let my representation of his words

stand. He went on to provide detailed feedback that I found very moving in parts. I don't wish to present much of it here – I feel he has given enough already. I will just say that his engagement with the thesis was rich and encouraging in terms of its potential value and contribution and that it reinforced my appreciation of the value and cost of the gift he gave me by being willing to revisit that time with a curious mind.

Sara (the 'hardest girl in the school' and a wonderful contributor) and I have spoken about the possibility of doing some events involving the people she works with through her anti-poverty work in the North East. I think she, like me, is keen to debunk the notion that educational outcomes are a good measure of a child's intelligence, determination and willingness to work hard. I hope other readers with an interest in the subject matter will be able to take something from it.

Conversations between my contributors and I will continue and I will respond and adapt as this project reaches forward into the future in various forms.

Committing to any path in life involves the abandonment of others. I think it might have been easier for me to find work post PhD if I'd spent the last four years working within a positivistic framework practicing questionnaire and survey-based methods. But that would have impeded the expression of my most powerful drives and so I don't regret not doing it. Given the time and word count constraints involved in doing a PhD, I would have been able to achieve greater depth, theoretically, if I'd worked within a single theoretical framework. Bourdieu would have been my choice if I had. But for all the reasons I've mentioned above, I'm glad I committed to a poststructural approach. I do regret my lack of artistic skills. Skills in those areas would have enabled me to create a more experimental piece of work, I think. I have produced a very 'wordy' thesis for someone who wishes to highlight the impossibility of 'capturing' the world through the written and spoken word. I'm not in bad company in this respect. Virtually all of the poststructurally inclined researcher-thinkers my thesis is in conversation with also work, in the main, with words and sentences. Engaging the material to produce

embodied and multi-sensory research is clearly easier said than done. Ideally, I would have liked to have the skill to use other materials to produce drawings and collages, soundscapes, music and films, not to supplement my writing but to produce an assemblage in which all these things, including my writing, could be woven together. If this wasn't a doctoral project and therefore a largely individual affair in terms of reward and recognition, I might have asked my friend Marega Palser to collaborate with me in its production. But it is a doctoral project and I wanted to produce something worthy of my contributors and so I restricted myself to the things I thought I'd be able to do well, or at least well enough. In addition to writing and having conversations with people, I have a reasonable eye for an interesting photo and some ability to recognise and select images that have the capacity to perform an expressive function in relation to the ideas that frame the thesis. The digital images of David as an 11-year-old Blakelaw pupil (figure 18) and the sunset illuminated bricks of the housing estate where Rob and I lived as children (fig 20) cannot substitute for the actual slender, pale body of my 11-year-old bother who is now 46 or the estate I lived on from the age of 6 where my mam still lives. But they do say something interesting about the embodied, material context of what we call our educational trajectories.

I hope my work communicates my passion for the ideas and concepts I have worked with and my belief in their potential to open up new, ethical, creative and fulfilling ways of being.

Carol Taylor observes:

> It often seems that passion has no place in academic writing [….] as we bend our thoughts, bodies, and emotions to producing another star-rated journal "output," engage in the never-ending pursuit for diminishing, and increasingly competitive, research funds, and burnish our public profiles on social media—meanwhile exhausting our passion in favour of commoditized, entrepreneurial academic productivity. (2016, p.203)

Poststructuralism is not a sentimental philosophy but nor is it one afraid of visceral passion and desire. Taylor's words remind me how privileged I am to have been able to take a doctoral path that has suited my capabilities, predispositions, strengths, obsessions and tastes. Without this invitation to 'express myself' I would have likely walked away during some particularly bleak moments over the past few years. I hope that this thesis and my efforts to communicate it in future, will encourage others who might have poststructural inclinations, whether or not they are aware of them, to consider applying poststructural ideas to their own work.

# Chapter 15

# Postlogue: Redeeming Tim

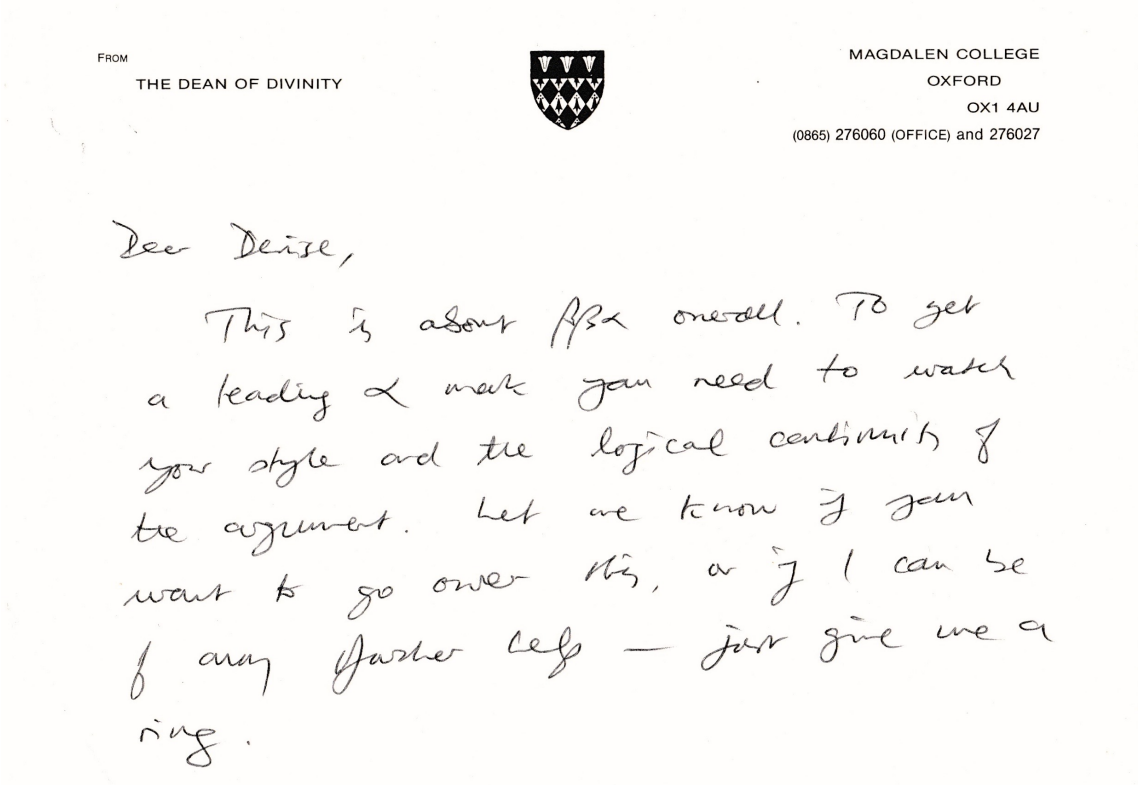
*Diffraction is not a singular event that happens in space and time…. Diffractions are untimely. Time is out of joint; it is diffracted, broken apart in different directions, non-contemporaneous with itself. Each moment is an infinite multiplicity. 'Now' is not an infinitesimal slice but an infinitely rich condensed node in a changing field diffracted across spacetime in its ongoing iterative repatterning.*

Karen Barad, Meeting the Universe Halfway, 2014, p. 169

*Shh! Listen! Someone's coming! I think — I think it might be us!*

J.K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, 2013

I am looking for the clipping of the excruciating local newspaper article covering my 'amazing achievement' of getting a place at Oxford. I don't find it[25] but I do come across a piece of paper that I have no recollection of ever receiving or reading.



FROM
THE DEAN OF DIVINITY

MAGDALEN COLLEGE
OXFORD
OX1 4AU
(0865) 276060 (OFFICE) and 276027

Dear Denise,

This is about A5a overall. To get a leading A mark you need to watch your style and the logical continuity of the argument. Let me know if you want to go over this, or if I can be of any further help — just give me a ring.

Fig 31 Essay feedback from an Oxford tutor, personal archives

It's a note from the Very Reverend Jeffrey John, the Dean of Divinity at Magdalen College, offering feedback on an essay I must have written during

[25] Reader, I think I might have accidentally thrown it out. I feel unexpectedly sad about this.

my 2nd year at Oxford. He awards me a ββα. That's a 'beta beta alpha'. It's an average mark, say a low to middling 2:1. It's not the mark that takes me by surprise but his suggestion that 'to get a leading α mark you need to watch your style and the logical continuity of the argument'. In other words, I have, in his view, the capacity to do well in this paper, to get a good 2:1 grade or even a first. He then tells me to let him know if I want to go over it or if he can be of any further help.

The note has been in my possession for the past 27 years and yet its contents come as a revelation. The subject-position I have embraced since I finished my undergraduate studies is now visible to me – academic struggler, intruder, the doomed subject of a social experiment. I realise that if I am to take this research process seriously, push myself, let go of this calcified version of myself and my past, I'm going to need the help of someone who was around at time. I need to get in touch with the Marxist chaplain.

…….

It takes me 5 or 6 attempts to get the wording in my email right. In the end, I adapt the forward from my MSc dissertation. It's a little formal, but then I haven't seen him in years and we were never friends, as such. I tell him that, against all the odds, I've won a PhD scholarship. I've done some work to identify the complex relationships between advantage, disadvantage, good and bad luck, people, time and place, all of which influenced what seemed and was possible as regards my formal education. I end with 'You were such a crucial part of the luck/people/time/place element. I'd love to talk to you a little about these matters.'

His response a few days later is short but encouraging:

> Of course you'd be welcome to come and ask any questions you like.

…….

The Marxist chaplain lives in a beautiful but isolated rural area (at least by the standards of someone like me who had only ever lived in cities). At his suggestion I take the train rather than drive ('more time to read, more relaxing, better for the environment'). He'll meet me at the station and we'll take it from there. A man pushes a refreshment trolley through the train's narrow aisle.

> Any beverages? Tea? Coffee? Soft drinks? A selection of sandwiches, hot and cold snacks?

I look up, smile and nod a greeting, whilst mouthing the words 'No thank you'. None of it looks very refreshing to me. I look out of the window at the countryside. I don't have an extensive vocabulary but I can see that it is green, gentle and pleasant. I imagine it might be relaxing to just sit and stare but the man in the seat behind me is wordlessly noisy, sniffing, grunting, muttering to himself and, despite being apparently awake, snoring. I feel bad for finding the noises repulsive. He's not doing any harm. I try to distract myself by focusing on my own body rather than his and suddenly realize that I am anxious. My throat feels constricted and I know if I were to speak my voice would sound high and strangulated. The sensitivity at the point where my ribs meet 8 or 9 inches below the bottom of my throat is back. My mouth and eyes feel dry. The man behind me isn't responsible but nor is he helping. I regret not buying an over-priced cardboard container of tea. It's not that the Marxist chaplain and I didn't get on. It's just that we never 'clicked'. We were from different worlds. I have no memories of us sharing a joke or engaging in discussion or gossip. I do remember that his book, Redeeming Time: Atonement Through Education (1986) was on the reading list he gave me during the summer before I 'went up' to Oxford. I liked the title but I found most of the contents impenetrable. Our meeting today will most likely be awkward.

I distract myself by flicking through my book of selected writings by Walter Benjamin, looking at the words and sentences I've underlined. I find one of my favourite passages:

> Language shows clearly that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theatre. It is the medium of past experience, as the ground is the medium in which dead cities lie interred. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging.

I wonder how the Marxist academic, who knows and loves theatre, will stage his memories and animate the younger versions of us both. I wonder how his memories might change the shape and texture of my own. Not at all if I don't manage to engage him in conversation. On a blank page at the front of my Walter Benjamin book I write some questions which I can call on if my mind goes blank or the conversation dries up:

- Why did you let me in?
- What did you see in me?
- Do you, or have you ever, regretted it?
- Were there others like me?
- Did you consider that I might need help adapting to Oxford life given my social background and poor A Level results?

And then a note to self:

> Don't forget to remind him that the person asking him questions is not the same as the young woman he let into Oxford many years ago – he won't hurt her feelings.

I sit back, look out of the window again and realise that the wordlessly noisy man has gone and that the train has arrived at the station.

…….

I rush to gather up my things and get off the train. There's no sign of him on the platform. I'd give him a ring but I don't have his mobile phone number. I'm not sure he has one. Some very middle-class people don't. Perhaps he's here but we haven't recognised one another. I make my way to the exit and

suddenly realise that we have passed one another as he enters the station. He hasn't changed at all in 20 odd years. I mean his beard and hair might be a greyer and shorter and I am a little surprised by how tall he is - well over 6 foot, I reckon – but apart from that there is no mistaking him. He is so familiar to me, so attached to a particular time and place, so utterly him that I don't really know what he looks like. What he'd look like to you, I mean. I have the same issue with my mam and with my own face.

Tim!

Denise!

Very few people call me Denise these days – they call me Dee or Denni or DAR (my initials) – but at Oxford, and in university now, oddly, I am Denise.

I'm sorry I'm late, I…

Not at all. I've literally just got here…

Oh good!

We hug.

I've got the car. I was going to suggest going somewhere near the station but Gill's made us a vegan tart so we'll home and have lunch.

Gill is Tim's wife. How kind. I wasn't expecting lunch. Tim's car is medium sized, not new but not on its last legs, comfortable but modest, very much like my own. I find silence uncomfortable unless I know someone well so I've prepared a conversational ice-breaker: Brexit. It's a good choice. Like me, Tim is still reeling after the EU referendum vote result. And within a minute or so, possibly less than that, I know that everything is going to be fine. For me, today, I mean. Not for the UK post-Brexit.

…….

I enjoy everything about the car journey to the house. The route is pretty and Tim provides interesting snippets of information along the way. 'They hate me in this village. It has strong military links. The last sermon I preached didn't go down well. It was very anti-militaristic, to be fair'. 'That's fantastic', I respond, approvingly. Tim asks me about my studies and I tell him how poststructuralism has had a big impact on the way I see the world, especially in terms of challenging binaries. It's nice to be able to talk to someone freely about my interest in social theory without worrying that I might bore them or give them the impression that I'm 'trying to be clever'. 'I'm a big fan of the binary', Tim says. 'Tory bastards on one side and everyone else on the other, that's how I see it' and we laugh. Theology does lend itself to binary thinking, to be fair: light and dark, lost and found, man and God – well apart from Jesus who is both man and God, apparently, but we don't revisit that old ground.

We arrive at his house, which is old and beautiful and attached to some land where he keeps sheep and bees. The inside of the house is equally old and beautiful. It is quite clean and quite tidy but not oppressively so. I feel comfortable amongst the books, art and furniture which is a little faded but robust, attractive. Tim starts to prepare lunch – Gill's vegan tart, new potatoes, rocket and tomato salad. Delicious. And we continue to chat.

I decide that I am not going to ask if I can record an 'interview'. I am not even going to take notes. My desire for us to continue with this conversation is greater than my desire to 'gather good data'. So I'm afraid I can't provide any quotes from a transcript or details of the things I wrote down at the time. I made my notes slowly on the train journey home, stopping to consider each revelation in turn. What follows is an approximation of what Tim told me in list form. If you want to, you could use your imagination to get a better idea of how the conversation went. We sat at the dining table and then in the living room. In between the points I've covered below we talked about Brecht and the power of art, sheep, collective living, family, mental illness, psychiatry, the intelligence of a skilled carpenter or a gifted

actor, both of whom have ways of knowing and being that are different to those lauded within academia, and of the importance of teachers who encourage and listen.

Firstly, I asked about my admission to Oxford. Tim wrote to several schools in socially disadvantaged areas. My RE teacher was one of the very few who responded. The admissions system was more flexible in those days and Oxford had a tradition of not relying on 'A' Level results to assess the suitability of candidates. Having said that, he did have to battle with some of his colleagues who believed that an 'A' Level result-based system was more meritocratic and therefore fair.

Secondly, there were others like me. A couple of years after he offered me a place he did the same with girl from a background similar to mine who had a C and 2 Es at 'A' Level. He was 'hauled over the coals' by the governing body for this but he fought back and won the argument. And she went on to get a first class degree. 'Wow', I said, 'she did really well', aware of a pang of shame about my own 2:2. 'Well yes', responded Tim, 'but people who get firsts aren't necessarily the cleverest, you know. Look at Karl Barthes [a fiendishly difficult to read systematic theologian] and Einstein. Being a creative thinker does you no favours at undergraduate level. Plus, people hit their academic stride at different times'.

This leads to the third point. 'So I'm guessing', I say to him, 'that my poor 'A' Level results and 2:2 were a bigger deal to me that you?' 'Oh yes!', he replied. Convincingly, too. 'Education is broad. School and university are only one part of it.'

The fourth point of interest is that Tim didn't tell any stories about my time at Oxford. It's not that he has a poor memory. He told several amusing stories about students who were at St. John's around the same time as me. I think this reflects my avoidance of social and extra-curricular educational activities with the other theologians wherever possible.

Fifthly, I was brave and asked Tim if it ever occurred to him that I might have needed some additional support. I'd meant academic support but he interpreted my question as relating to social support which is also pertinent. His answer was a confident 'no'. Being 19 is painful and Oxford is a hard, sometimes toxic place no matter who you are or where you have come from. He hated his time as an undergraduate. 'You have to be careful about attributing misery to social background or characteristics'.

The sixth point is the one I find most fascinating and challenging to the subject-position I clung to for years. Tim is not from a privileged background. His parents were working class and he was brought up on a council estate. He failed the 11+ and went to a secondary modern, which was a terrible disappointment. There, two teachers had a great impact on the way he saw himself and the future he began to envisage for himself. One let him write long essays on various topics, always responding with a tick. This was enough to encourage him to keep thinking and writing. The other introduced him to Shakespeare, casting him in main parts in the school plays. He did well, eventually, and got into Oxford without the help of a Marxist chaplain. 'I didn't make the most of it academically' he told me 'but it did open doors.' He hit his academic stride a few years later and became an Oxford Don.

And finally, I think I better ask…

'Are you a Marxist, Tim?'

Yes, he is. He's not a purist but he does find Marx's ideas convincing and fruitful to think with. I am relieved to hear this.

Eventually, after several very enjoyable hours of conversation, I asked for a lift to the station. And I felt sad that we don't live closer to one another.

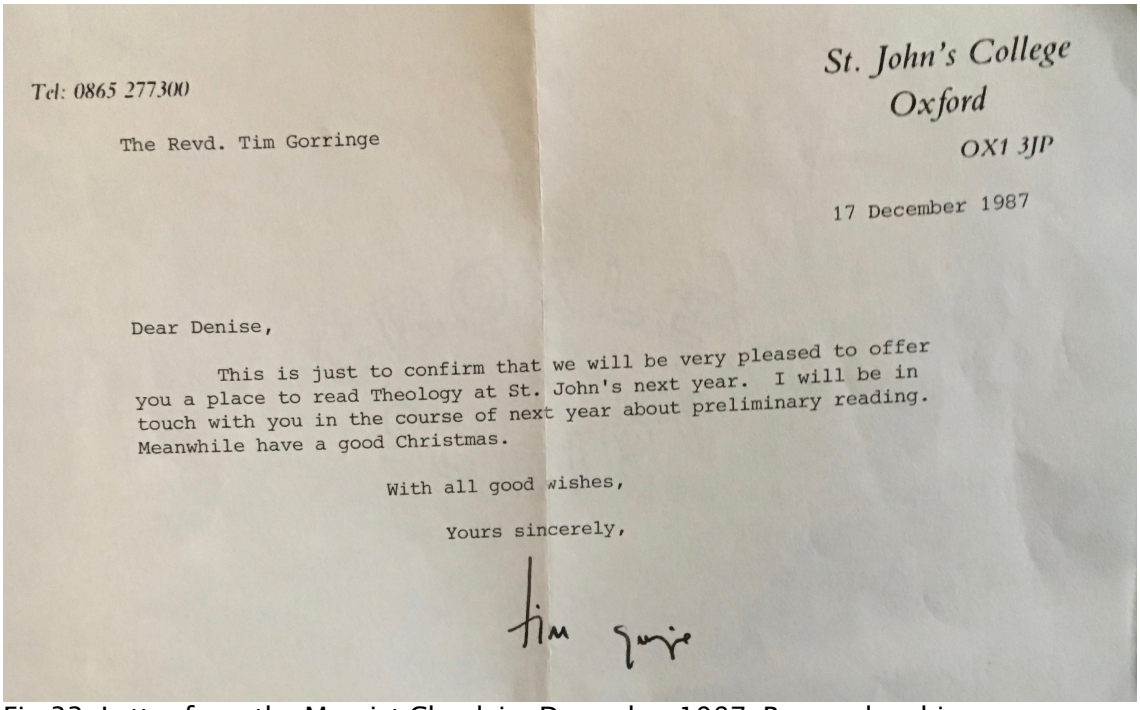
…….

On the train journey home I turn again to the underlined Walter Benjamin quote:

> .... memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theatre…. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging.

I have been digging all afternoon, excavating, restoring, preserving and discarding elements of my own past. I speculate on what made this afternoon possible. Unlike 'Oxford undergraduate me', I have heard of Brecht and love him. And I now have at least some understanding of Marxist theory. I think Tim approves of the fact that I have not sought to capitalize financially on my Oxford branding. And I approve of his approval. We are, I think, both inverted snobs when it comes to the accumulation of economic capital. Perhaps that's because 'people like us' find it easier to envisage ourselves as rich in cultural capital than wealthy. What else? We both love bees. And sheep (though I don't eat them). We have similar taste in furniture and, amazingly, we seem to share a sense of humour. I have no idea how that happened. Perhaps he has softened. Perhaps I have toughened up. Perhaps we always had a capacity for connection. Maybe I was just too miserable to recognize it. Or maybe we are both different people now. Whatever the reasons, something has become unstuck as a result of our conversation. I feel a little freer, a little lighter than I have in a long time.

…….



Tel: 0865 277300

St. John's College
Oxford
OX1 3JP

The Revd. Tim Gorringe

17 December 1987

Dear Denise,

This is just to confirm that we will be very pleased to offer you a place to read Theology at St. John's next year. I will be in touch with you in the course of next year about preliminary reading. Meanwhile have a good Christmas.

With all good wishes,

Yours sincerely,

tim gorringe

Fig 32: Letter from the Marxist Chaplain, December 1987, Personal archives

# Appendix A – Ethical Approval Confirmation

I was granted ethical approval to undertake my research by the Bristol University Postgraduate School of Education Ethics Committee in August 2015.

From: **Ethics Online Tool Administrator**
Date: Thu, 20 Aug 2015 at 17:37
Subject: Ethics Online Tool: application signed off
To: <denise.a.rogers.2013@my.bristol.ac.uk>

Your Ethics Outline Application for your research project I Survived Blakelaw School: Journeys from 'the Worst School in Britain' to University and Beyond has been granted ethical approval, you can begin your research.

# Appendix B – Notes of guidance for research contributors

**Overview of the project**

1. I am interested in the experiences and perspectives of people who went to university despite being statistically unlikely to do so. This includes, for example, people who lived in social housing, went to a low achieving state school, lived in an economically poor area and whose parents were unemployed or in low paid jobs with no or few qualifications.

2. My research focuses on the educational journeys of former Blakelaw School pupils (and pupils from Firfield Community School, as Blakelaw was renamed in 1998). I went to Blakelaw myself between 1980 and 1987 and will be a contributor as well as the main researcher. I want to explore what it was like to be a Blakelaw pupil, the ways in which going to Blakelaw encouraged or frustrated our ambitions and attempts to go to university and factors outside school that might have had a bearing on our educational careers.

3. I aim to recruit a small group of former Blakelaw pupils willing to contribute to the project in face-to-face and email conversations and via a closed online group where we can share memories and photographs from our school days. I would also like to interview some teachers about their memories of Blakelaw in the 80s and 90s. I have gathered a variety of media featuring Blakelaw / Firfield School including newspaper clippings, a Channel Four documentary and a Newcastle University teacher training resource. I'd welcome contributors' opinions on the way in which the school, pupils and teachers are portrayed in them.

4. My intention is not to present a single 'truth' about why and how we ended up going to university, but rather to explore the complexities of our

educational journeys and challenge overly simplistic media and political depictions of good or bad schools and high or low ability pupils.

**Your role in the project**

5. I will ask you to share memories about your educational journey. You are free to refuse to answer any questions or to leave out any details you'd rather not go into.

6. I welcome any level of involvement in the project. If you are willing to be interviewed and contribute to the online discussion forum that's great, but if you only want to exchange some emails and leave it there, I'd value that too.

7. I will request that you allow me to record any interviews so that I can listen to them in future and transcribe sections. You are free to say no. If you do give me permission to record our conversation I will transfer all recordings to Bristol University's encrypted drive and my password protected home computer and then delete the file from the recording device.

8. I will share with you any written work that refers directly to you or uses your words prior to using it within my thesis or in any publications or conference papers I write as a doctoral student. I will ask: whether you are happy with what I've written as it stands; whether you are happy with what I've written so long as I make some amendments; whether you wish to refuse permission for me to use that particular section of writing; or, whether you want to withdraw from the project. Where you wish to withdraw from the project you are free to ask me to destroy all the data I've collected from you and make no reference to you within subsequent work.

9. Given the time pressures of the project, I would ask that, where possible, you let me know within 2 weeks of receiving a written section whether you want to refuse permission for me to use it or wish to withdraw from the project as a whole.

10. Whilst you have the option of using a pseudonym and I can alter or omit details of your stories, the likely overlap in many of our memories presents a risk that you will be identifiable nonetheless. I would like to have a conversation with you about whether you wish to be 'visible' within the writing. If you want to contribute but do not wish to be visible, I may be able to incorporate some of your stories and views into my writing without referring to you directly. I will share with you any written work in which I attempt to do this. If you, or I, feel that your anonymity is not sufficiently protected I will omit the details you shared with me.

11. Our memories and stories are also likely to involve people who have not consented to contribute to the study, e.g. family members, teachers and school friends. I will discuss potential issues with each contributor. Where you or I have any concerns about the implications of non-consenting contributors being identified, I will remove all references to them. Where you are happy for me to do so, I might ask a family member to contribute to the project. Where they agree, this guidance will apply to them.

12. If you wish to make a complaint about me or discuss your concerns about my conduct you can contact the GSoE ethics coordinators:

Wan Ching Yee Wan.Yee@bristol.ac.uk

Frances Giampapa Frances.Giampapa@bristol.ac.uk

35 Berkeley Square

Graduate School of Education

University of Bristol

BS8 1JA

I'd be very grateful if you could let me know that you've read the above guidance and are happy to proceed as a contributor for the time being. Do ask if you have any questions or wish to discuss anything in more detail.

Thank you so much for you contribution. I really appreciate it.

Denise Rogers

Doctoral Researcher

Graduate School of Education

University of Bristol

Mob: 07891614925 / dr13261@my.bristol.ac.uk

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